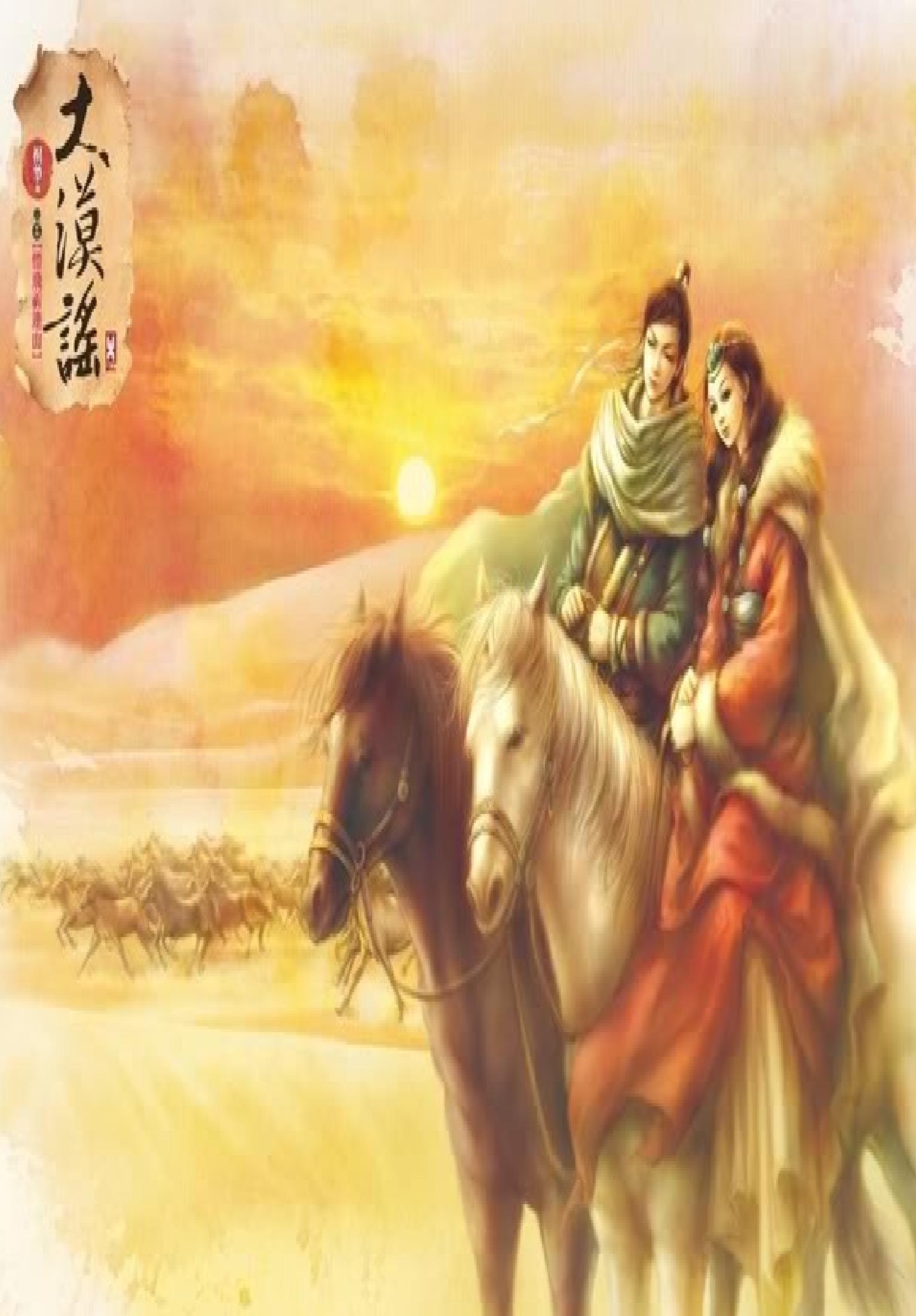


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Ballad of the Desert - Volume 1 - Chapter 1

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Chapter 1: The Past

The days pass as fast as the nightly desert winds, a moment becomes a thousand miles. It was supposed to be a brief respite after being injured, but the grass on the plains have wilted three times already and the leaves in the Hu Yang Forest have fallen three times already. Three years, over a thousand some days and nights, accompanying the wolf pack wandering from the North of the desert to the South, and then back up to the North again. Within the happy playing, I've almost never left the wolf pack. The six years spent with Papa appears to be buried underneath the yellow sand. Except.....it is but an appearance.

In the dark night, when all is quiet, next to the fire I sit with Brother Wolf. He's already deep asleep but I have not one whit of sleep in me. During the day, I glimpsed the Xiong Nu army, the first time in three years. Unexpectedly, under the thundering hooves of the horses, it awakened the buried past of years ago.

Nine years ago, Xi Yu desert.

A person lies in the desert. I stare at his eyes, he stares back at me. A lizard crawls over his face. He doesn't stir. I curiously use my paws to swat his face, but he still doesn't stir. But the corner of his mouth turns down, like he's smiling.

I investigated from sun up til sun down, finally realizing why he doesn't move. He's dying of thirst.

Even today I do not understand why I saved him? Why give him the sheep I worked hard to capture? Why did I find myself a Papa? Is it because his eyes has something that seems familiar, yet also unfamiliar? After feeding him fresh blood, he regained his strength, and then did the proverbial thing people are said to do – metaphorically stabbed me in the back he did. He used a rope to secure me and took me away from the Gobi desert where I lived with the wolf pack, bringing me into a tent where humans live.

He drank the fresh blood of the sheep, but forbade me from drinking blood or eating raw meat. He forced me to walk upright, forced me to learn to talk like him, forced me to call him "Papa". For this I fought with him often, but he was never afraid. After every fight I would try to run away, and he would capture me back.

The torture was hard to endure. I didn't know why he treated me this way. Why force me to be a human being? Is there anything wrong with being a wolf? He told me – I am a

human, not a wolf, so I can only be a human. Once I started to write, I understood a bit about my past. I was a lost or abandoned orphan that was raised by the wolf pack, who treated me like a baby wolf, yet he is trying to turn me back into a human.

“I won’t comb anymore!” I screamed as I threw the brush down. I was so angry I wanted to take it out on something. My arms are tired and still my hair is a mess and I can’t make a simple braid. Initially I was excited to look at how pretty I looked by the edge of the river, but the ever messier hair left me with only a belly full of frustration.

A bright clear day, there was only one average sized cow by the river banks drinking water. I eyed the black cow and then walked behind it, delivering a huge kick to its flank hoping to shove it into the water. The cow moo’d but didn’t move. I wasn’t done with it so I kicked it again. With a flick of a tail and a head turned to look at me, I realized something was wrong. I found the wrong outlet for my frustration. The cow was a rock, and I was the egg.

I decided to go first and unleashed a wolf howl, hoping to scare it away. Usually when I did this, the horses and sheep would run away scared. But the cow just turned and pointed its horns at me, spitting mad. The second it started to move, I turned and ran with a scared scream. I finally understood why people used the phrase “bull temper” when chiding stubborn people.

I felt my butt hurt but I had no time to worry, turning left and right.....

“Brother Cow, I was wrong, please stop chasing me. I would never dare kick you again, I’ll only pick on the sheep from now on.” I was exhausted but the cow kept chasing. “Stupid cow, I warn you, don’t think I’m just a lone wolf right now, I have a lot of companions. When I find my companions, we’ll eat you.” My threats didn’t work, leaving me crying as I kept running.

Running out of breath, I said “If you....harm.....me.....my.....my Papa will cook you, so please....stop chasing....chasing me.”

My words seems to have worked, as two people walked by, one of them Papa. I ran towards him, the first time he’s seen me wanting him as I reached my hands out and ran into his embrace. He grabbed me before realizing the cow was almost upon us. It was too late to dodge, when the other man suddenly stepped in front of Papa and faced the cow.

I stared wide eyed as the cow charged him, but with lightning quick reflexes he grabbed the cow’s horns and immobilized it. The cow tried to push forward but the man held his ground. I stare and thought to myself – if he was a wolf, he would be the leader of the wolf pack.

Papa held me and moved me aside. He smilingly complimented the man “Often hearing of my Lord’s title as the number 1 warrior of the Xiong Nu tribe, now I know the honor is well-deserved.” The young man smiled “Just a little brawn is all, used only to defeat a small cow. How can it compete with Teacher’s vast knowledge?”

The young man watched as I struggled out of Papa’s grasp. Papa said “All I know are the dead knowledge in books. My Lord has already learned more from the world.”

I walked over to the young man and kicked the cow “Chasing me? Still want to chase?

Huh, huh? Kick you twice, for chasing me until I almost died.”

The tamed cow started to stir and Papa grabbed me again, apologizing to the young man. “This is my little girl. She’s got a willful temper. Apologies for creating problems for my Lord.”

When Papa wanted me to bow, I stood there and stared, I was too young then to assess a person’s looks, but facing someone that handsome was something even I could easily comprehend. I stared for a long while before blurting out “You are so good looking. Are you the most handsome man in the entire Xiong Nu tribe? But Yu Dan is also good looking. I wonder if he’s as grown up as you, he will be as handsome as you?”

He lightly coughed twice and with a small smile sneaked a quick peek at Papa. He turned to manage the cow, while Papa quickly apologized for not teaching me proper manners. He let the cow go and turned to see Papa covering my mouth with one hand while restraining me with the other, while I tried to kick at him.

He shot Papa an understanding look “This is surely more difficult than taming a furious cow.” How dare he compare me to a cow! I glared at him which only made him laugh. He told Papa “Since Teacher has pressing things to take care off, I shall be off.”

Once he left, Papa dragged me back to the tent. I thought he would horse whip me like I’ve seen parents do to kids here on the plains. But instead he took out a comb and made me sit down. “Hair flying everywhere. The Lord might not be the best looking man in the Xiong Nu tribe, but right now you are surely the ugliest girl on the plains.”

I immediately stilled and looked in a mirror. “Uglier than that old grandma who lost all her teeth we saw a few days ago?” “Yes.” “Uglier than the fat woman who could barely walk?” “Yes.” I stared at myself in the mirror, caked with dirt, hair everywhere, as scraggly as can be. The only thing nice was a pair of shining eyes.

Papa washed my face and braided my hair. “Let’s braid two braids. I’ll do one, and you can learn from me and do the other. Once we are done, you’ll be the prettiest girl I have ever seen.”

.....

The embers started popping, startling me awake. Brother Wolf stretched and then flopped back down. I patted his back and let my mind slip back into the past. That year I was perhaps 7 or 8 years old and had just started living with Papa for one year. That was the day I learned to braid my hair, and it was also the day I first met Yi Zhi Xie. A good friend of my Papa’s, the uncle to the Crown Prince Yu Dan, the younger brother to the Shan Yu (the Leader of the Xiong Nu tribe). Because he often came to see Papa, we became very familiar with each other. He would take me along every time he went hunting.

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Papa won’t let me attend the banquet unless I memorized the “State Manual”. I chewed my nails and asked Papa why he doesn’t just go teach Yu Dan, since Yu Dan is his student. Or have Yi Zhi Xie memorize it, which he would love because he loves reading Han books. I only like to hunt. Papa glared at me, so I shot back “Yu Dan doesn’t ask me to address him as Crown Prince. And Yi Zhi Xie says I can address him by his name. Why

can't I?"

Papa sighed and explained to me that these are the strictures of this world. They can address me directly, but I need to speak to them respectfully. In the wolf pack, little wolves also need to respect the older wolves. Yu Dan is 4-5 years older than me, and Yi Zhi Xie is 7-8 years older. I need to respect them.

I realized he made sense this time so agreed to address them as Crown Prince and my Lord. But I still didn't want to memorize the book today, I wanted to attend the banquet and eat roasted lamb meat. Dad took my hand out of my mouth and wiped it. "You're almost 10 yet you refuse to grow up. His Lord was already on the battlefield when he was your age."

I boasted that he couldn't beat me when we chased rabbits together. But I remembered my promise to him and clapped my mouth shut. "I promised I wouldn't tell otherwise he won't take me out playing anymore. Please don't let him know." Dad smiled and brought up the "State Manual". I called him a villain and tromped off to memorize it.

Dad was called away by the Dan Yu, and immediately I ran outside to have fun. I found Yi Zhi Xie sitting by the slope and tip-toed over to scare him. When I got close, he suddenly lunged over and grabbed me, scaring me. I laughed and held him by the neck. "Yi.....my Lord, why are you here? I heard you are getting married and tonight's banquet is for you."

Yi Zhi Xie held me on his lap, asking if my Papa lectured me on proper manners, always forgetting that the Xiong Nu don't care about such formalities. He confirmed he was getting a lady wife. I looked at his face and asked why he wasn't happy? "Isn't she the only daughter of a great general and everyone wants her? If Yu Dan wasn't so young, the Shan Yu will surely have married her to him."

He smiled "Silly girl, pretty isn't everything. I'm not happy or unhappy."

"Papa says a married couple spends a lifetime together. I want someone good looking when I get married." I looked at his chiseled face carefully. "At least it can't be someone worse than you." Yi Zhi Xie laughed and tapped my cheeks "How old are you, already itching to leave your Papa?"

My smile froze, he and Yu Dan know how old they are, but I don't. I'm probably 9 or 10 years old right now, but there is no way to be certain. Yi Zhi Xie thinks it's a good thing, what others have no control over, I can choose for myself. I got excited "Yes, Yes, I can decided how old I am! I want to be 10, so I can make Mu Da Duo call me older sister."

He smiled and patted my head, turning to look towards the distance. I wanted to go hunting rabbits but he didn't agree readily as before. I asked what he was looking at, but he instead asked me what was due South East of here.

I named the sheep, the mountains, the Gobi Desert, then finally the Han kingdom, homeland to Papa, who says it's very beautiful there. Yi Zhi Xie remarked that the Xiong Nu lands are also quite beautiful. While the Han dynasty is nothing special, the current Han Emperor is someone special. I wondered if he was better looking than Yi Zhi Xie?

Yi Zhi Xie lamented being born a few years too late. He can only watch the Han dynasty continue to expand, little by little encroaching ever close to the Xiong Nu lands. General

Wei Qing already is a headache. If a few more powerful generals emerge, with the power hungry drive of the current Emperor, the Xiong Nu tribe may one day be eliminated.

I looked East, and then back at him. I didn't say anything, just put my hand in my mouth to chew on my nails. I just looked at him as he lightly touched my eyes and his hands stopped at my lips. He smiled "I hope in a few years, you will understand what I am saying, and will still be willing to sit by my side and listen to me talk."

He took my hand out and wiped it with his sleeve. He pulled me up and said "I have to go back to prepare for tonight's banquet." I decided to go find Yu Dan to watch this afternoon's archery competition, hoping I don't run into Papa.

I hold a platter with a lamb's head and kneel before Yi Zhi Xie. Somehow my actions have transformed the formerly merry banquet into total silence. The Shan Yu pretends to smile, Papa looks torn, Yu Dan looks upset, and finally I peek at Yi Zhi Xie. His brows tighten for a second before his face is suddenly expressionless, but his eyes are warm. My shaking hands stop trembling under the eyes of everyone staring at me.

Yi Zhi Xie explains that I have never seen the power of the Shan Yu in action, so of course I will assume a small falcon is a great eagle. He announces that the biggest hero in the Xiong Nu today is surely Yu Dan, who didn't miss a single target in today's archery competition. He takes the lamb platter from me, giving me a wink, and goes to kneel before Yu Dan. He lowers his head and presents the platter to him.

Everyone claps and laughs, complimenting Yu Dan as having the prowess as a young Dan Yu did. Everyone goes up to toast him. Yu Dan, with Yi Zhi Xie still kneeling before him, takes a knife and slices off a piece of the lamb and pops it in his mouth. From beginning to end, Yi Zhi Xie humbly kneels before him with his head bowed. The Shan Yu finally smiles and goes to help Yi Zhi Xie up. The two share a toast.

I was the only one who didn't smile during the entire proceeding. I was huddling next to Papa, watching something I didn't fully understand. If it wasn't for my thoughtlessness, Yi Zhi Xie would not have to kneel before everyone, bow his head to someone younger and smaller than him.

Papa cheered me up, telling me to go memorize the "State Manual" and understand what I did wrong today, and learn to avoid such actions in the future. He thinks he also failed in teaching me.

I don't know how to ride so I can't go far to play. The only two people who dared to disobey Papa's rule and take me out to play – one I am avoiding because I did something wrong to him, the other is mad at me and won't come find me.

I saw Yu Dan by the river banks and ignored him to go play on the other side. He warned me to stay away from the banks in case I fall in since I can't swim. I walked into the river a few steps, leading Yu Dan to angrily pull me out. I yelled "Just because you are afraid and can't swim, I'm not afraid."

Yu Dan laughed "I'm the one who should be upset, but here you are yelling at me." I remembered what happened that day and felt some guilt. Yu Dan selected me to present the lamb head. But instead of presenting it to the Shan Yu, I presented it to Yi Zhi Xie. It upset the Shan Yu and caused trouble for my hero. I lowered my head and didn't speak.

Yu Dan grabbed my hand “If you’re not angry anymore, let’s go play.” I tempered my smile but nodded my head. We held hands and started to run.

.....

When I was 10 years old, because of Yi Zhi Xie, it was the first time I understood the books Papa made me memorize every day. It was my first time observing the Shan Yu, Yi Zhi Xie, and Yu Dan. I started to realize that they were the closest of kin, but also could one day become what the Han books call kin killing kin.

.....

Yi Zhi Xie’s wife combs her hair and asked her husband if he likes the new Han style. Yi Zhi Xie places a flower in the new hairdo and compliments her, which makes her blush. I furrowed my brows and let out a sigh, turning to leave. Suddenly a female voice called out “Who is there?” Yi Zhi Xie immediately calls out “Yu Jin, come inside.”

I stood outside until I could force a happy face on before walking into the tent. I bowed to his lady wife, which caused a sliver of shock to pass over Yi Zhi Xie’s face. She asked how he knew I was outside. “She’s the only one going from tent to tent, the soldiers see her and don’t mind. Other than her, who else can eavesdrop outside?”

She invites me to visit with the Shan Yu’s wife to learn new Han hair designs and other such fun stuff. I decline, claiming I have no such talent to learn such skills, preferring just to chase rabbits. She smiles and pecks me on the cheek for being so sweet despite having heard rumors of my bad temper. She flounces off by herself after stating that Yi Zhi Xie is too busy to take me out hunting today. After she leaves is when I raise my hand to wipe where she kissed me.

Yi Zhi Xie looks at me and shakes his head with a smile. I let out a sigh and turn to leave when he gets up and asks me to wait. He grabs my hand “I still have some time to go out for a walk.” He drags me along as we walk higher up the cliffs. “I haven’t seen you in a long time. When I visit your Papa you are nowhere to be found. Did you make up with Yu Dan?” I nod my head, then shake it.

“Did you two get in a fight? You should use that fake act you just put on with Yu Dan. I’m sure you’ll get him all happy again” Yi Zhi Xie teases me.

I think to myself. Everyone knows how loving you are to your wife after the wedding. I don’t want you to be in a bind, so I purposely am nice to her. But why are you like this? Is it true you are only nice to her because her father holds the control over the army? Or to make her happy, you don’t care about what you used to like. “You are also fake, knowing you don’t like the Han hairstyle but lying that you do.”

He sits down and pulls me to sit next to him. He stares at me for a while and lets out a sigh. “Yu Jin, you’re starting to grow up.”

I grabbed my knees and also let out a sigh. “Were you really hurt that night? It was all my fault. I’ve listened to Papa and started reflecting.” Yi Zhi Xie stares off into the distance with a small smile, neither answering that he was hurt or not hurt. I stared at his profile, trying to figure it out.

“Why did you fight with Yu Dan this time?” I refused to answer. “Why are you so missish

all of a sudden?" I bit my lips, "Yu Dan said that you only take me out to play because of Papa, is that true?"

He lowered his head and laughed, while I stared anxiously waiting for his response. He just kept laughing. I grew enraged so he coughed to control his laughter. He stared at me for a good long while before he suddenly lowered his head and whispered in my ear "because of your eyes." When he stared at me, he stared so intently it was like everything he hid inside himself bubbled forth. It was intense, but I didn't understand.

My eyes? I suspiciously rubbed my eyes and thought about it. But I still didn't understand. But at least the worry in my heart was eased. I laughed. As long as it's not because of Papa. All I want is someone who is nice to me because of me.

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My heart clenched, sighing as I rested my face on my knees. Stupid Yu Jin. Yi Zhi Xie could woo his lady wife, why can't he do the same thing to make the very silly me happy? Perhaps Yu Dan was right and I just refused to listen to him. Papa also foolishly trusted Yi Zhi Xie. It turns out that the hot-tempered rash Yu Dan was the most clear-headed amongst us all. Yu Dan, Yu Dan.....the moon is going down as the embers in the fire. Looking at the red flames that aren't very hot, it was like the sun the day Yu Dan took me to dig for birds nests.

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I list out all the books Papa wants me to memorize. How can I possibly memorize all that even in my entire lifetime? Why do I need to spend my days memorizing this stuff about court politics and warfare? Yu Dan comes to find me and I quickly drop my book and bound out of the tent, asking where he's taking me to play. I remember too late and have to add a courtesy afterwards. Yu Dan hits me on the head and reminds me they don't adhere to such formal gestures like the Han people do. He doesn't want me to learn from Papa and become a silly woman. I hit him back on the head, reminding him that his mom is a Han woman, so does that make her silly?

Yu Dan holds my hand and we take off running. He considers her a Xiong Nu once she married a Xiong Nu man. He pulls me up on the horse and we ride together, with him wondering why Papa doesn't allow me to learn to ride a horse. I explain how I used to always try to run away, how could he dare let me learn to ride a horse. Now Papa probably thinks my time is best spent reading.

Yu Dan smiles and says "My royal father says I can marry next year, asking if I liked the daughter of a Lord. I want to ask him to let you be my Queen." I shook my head "Nope. When I grow taller and learn more martial arts skills, I want to travel the world. Plus the Shan Yu and my Papa will surely not agree to let me marry you. You are the Crown Prince, and will be the Shan Yu one day. That Lord's daughter is suitable to be your wife."

Yu Dan stops the horse and carries me off "I can beg my royal father. Once you marry me, you will be the Xiong Nu Queen and can go anywhere you want. No one will stop you and no one will force you to study." I counter with the fact that his mother never travels and doesn't appear to smile much or seem particularly happy. The Han book says that despite being the ruler, one cannot do as one wishes. Yu Dan huffs that people are silly and he'll

do as he wishes.

I ask if he thinks Yi Zhi Xie is silly, because he spoke about a man learning to endure the vagaries of life. Yu Dan glared at me and then tromped off, muttering “Yi Zhi Xie, Yi Zhi Xie, humph!” “Why are all of you complimenting him – he’s smart, strong, brave.....” I laugh and tease him about being jealous. Yu Dan’s smile is cold as he says “What do I have to be jealous about? One day he will bow each time he sees me.”

I startle and grab his hand “Please don’t be mad. I didn’t say he was better than you. He has his strengths and you have yours. Right now you are not any less great than he is, and in the future you will surely surpass him.”

Yu Dan’s anger turns into a smile “Let’s stop talking about him, I brought you here to play, not to discuss him.”

We walk through the bushes making no noise when we hear a noise nearby. We see something that stops us in our tracks. It’s Papa and Yu Dan’s mom, sitting next to each other, faces pale, with Yu Dan’s mother crying. She leans her head on Papa’s shoulder and continues to cry. I wanted to ask why she isn’t crying to the Shan Yu when Yu Dan grabs my hand and tries to drag me away. Papa hears the noise and we show ourselves. Papa gives me a sad look while Yu Dan’s mother just stares at us for a few moments before walking away.

I ask about why everyone is staring and to explain what is going on. Papa opens his mouth to explain when Yu Dan lets go of my hand and runs off. Papa takes my hand and leads me away while I continue to pester him with questions about what just happened. Papa sighs, explaining that what is between a man and a woman is not something I can understand right now. I argue that if he doesn’t explain, I’ll never learn.

Papa leads me to the banks of the lake and we sit down. He explains that he and Yu Dan’s mom knew each other since they were young. She was just the daughter of an official, while he was a man who was eager to establish himself. When I ask why she didn’t marry Papa and instead became the Shan Yu’s wife, Papa ruefully wonders whether to tell the long or the short of it.

Back then, the Han dynasty could not defeat or conquer the Xiong Nu, so they elected to inter-marry to preserve the tentative peace. But the royal family did not want to sacrifice their own princesses, so they selected the most beautiful and talented daughters of the court officials and crowned them princesses before marrying them off to the Xiong Nu. Papa explained that he was too weak to take her to run away, and she couldn’t abandon her parents to great dishonor and betrayal. So she married the Shan Yu, who did not know how to appreciate her. So she was just crying for her fate in life.

Papa sighed, wishing they were born a few years later, at this juncture when the current Han Emperor is on the throne. Perhaps everything would be different. His words triggered my memory of two years ago, sitting with Yi Zhi Xie before his engagement banquet. He wished then to be born a few years earlier, to be able to fight the current Han Emperor and determine a victor and a loser rather than watching the Hans continue to expand their empire into the Xiong Nu lands. One wanted to be born later, one wanted to be born earlier.

Papa asks if I understood and I truthfully reply that I understand about half of it. I got the politics part, but don't understand why Yu Dan was so mad back there. I promise Papa I will try to calm Yu Dan down. I then asked "Papa, in making me read all those books, is it because you don't want me to become only a flower?" Papa nods, he doesn't know if he's doing the right thing, he only knows that Yu Dan's mother learned all the female arts but continues to suffer. I promise Papa that I will never be a pampered flower. I want to be a great big tree, so that no one can make me suffer.

Papa rubbed my head "Your personality really isn't like that (a flower). Because you're so direct, I want you to learn to think carefully and observe people. To learn to strategize or else your stubbornness will lead you to be unable to endure and can't protect yourself. I would rather throw you back to the wolf pack in that case."

I mutter that I don't want to be a person, but Papa laughs that I'm already a person and can't even go back to being a wolf. Papa stares out onto the water "One day when Yu Dan becomes the Shan Yu, I'll take you back to the Central Plains (Han territory). As my daughter you can't stay here in the Xiong Nu too long. I only taught you to read and write Han characters, refusing to allow you to learn Xiong Nu for this reason. She....she will become the Dowager Queen and live well. Yu Dan will take good care of her."

I wonder why he won't marry her then? She can just get remarried. Papa sighs "A moment's missed chance is a lifetime's missed chance. A person's life will have numerous instances where you won't be able to turn back and get another chance." I keep asking why not get another chance but Papa wants me to ask him again when we return to the Central Plains and I've grown up. He pulls me home to do more homework otherwise no dinner for me.

It wasn't even a year later when the current Shan Yu died in an accident.....

I suddenly stand up and take a few deep breaths. I stare at the sun rising from the East. So it is that I still can't think about the past without feeling a stabbing pain of hurt. The past is like the dying embers on the ground, all that remains is black dust. But if you want to sweep it away immediately, it will still burn your hands. But one day it will cool down.

Papa's last words to me still resonate in my ears. "Yu Jin, Papa apologizes to you. I thought I would keep watch over you until you married and had kids. But now....now Papa cannot return to the Central Plains with you. You must get back by yourself. This time you are the rabbit and they are the wolves. You have to escape and run with all your might. Once you escape back to the Central Plains you will be safe. You must live well, promise Papa. No matter what you encounter, you have to try hard to survive and live as happily as possible. Papa's only wish is for you to live well."

The sun happily bounds up and shines over the plains. I turn my face to the bright light and exclaim "Papa, I am doing well and am very happy. You and Yu Dan's mom need to also be happy. And Yu Dan, you as well."

Papa never let me be a wolf, always wanting me to return to the Central Plains. But I needn't escape to the Central Plains to be safe. In this vast Xi Yu territory, no one can catch the me of today. Not even Yi Zhi Xie, the Xiong Nu tribe's current Shan Yu.

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 1 - Chapter

2

Chapter 2: First Meeting

Brother Wolf gets up with the sun, his silver fur glistening in the light. He raises his head and lets out a long howl, the sound reverberating in the sky. I follow suit and let out a long howl, raising my hands high towards the sky, like I'm embracing the sun and embracing the new day. The birds all take flight into the dancing clouds. I laugh and kick Brother Wolf, "Race ya to the banks of the Yue Ya Spring", taking off before my howls have even fallen.

In three years time, Brother Wolf is as tall as my waist. I call him (elder) Brother Wolf not because he's older than me, it's just what I decided to call him, When I rejoined the pack, he was just one year old and learning to hunt. But now he is the Leader of the wolf pack. Even though I constantly kick him when we are alone, but deep down I do respect him.

Brother Wolf sensed I was deep in thought. He bent down to drink and let out a few humphs. He sees himself as the world's most handsome, most powerful specimen – the male wolves all bow to him and the female wolves all faint at the sight of him. Except when it comes to me. I don't cow before him, which is sad for him. Perhaps he wonders why he was born in the same world as me.

To help identify the wolves, I once tried to name them numerically. Wolf 1, wolf 2, wolf 3, all the way to wolf 99 when I first arrived. But following Brother Wolf and my vast conquering strategy, I've totally lost track, with the last count I kept being wolf 19,999. And that was two years ago already. When I see a wolf and can't remember its name, I decided to give up. One day Brother Wolf and I will surely conquer all the wolves. But not having a wolf's keen sense of smell, it's hard for me to remember all the wolf faces.

Would Papa be happy or sad to know that I'm using all the knowledge he taught me to conquer the wolves. If I had learned more and understood it all earlier, maybe I could have helped him, and things might be different today.

I start humming a ditty but Brother Wolf gives me a dirty look before closing his eyes. Like I don't think he's all that, he also never thought I was pretty. Compared to the glowing fur of the female wolves, I'm likely so ugly it hurts his eyes.

I glare at him back and continue to braid my hair and hum my tune. Looking at my reflection in the water, in three years time I've transformed from Papa's ugly little girl into a pretty young lady. Perhaps I can't call myself a lady, but I know I am beautiful. I made a face at my own reflection and nod my head in satisfaction. I let out a whistle to let Brother Wolf know we can set out. He gets up and we slowly jog off.

We are on the plateau of the Ming Sa Mountains, staring down at a traveling caravan getting ready to set up camp. Thinking of my remaining little bit of salt and my tattered skirt, I crouched down and smile seductively at Brother Wolf. He's unaffected by my attempt to entrance him, looking more like he's seen a monster. He takes a few steps back and furrows his brows and frowns. He shoots me a few sneers.

I growl low and soft to him, asking him to go back first. I plan to sneak into the caravan. He stares and indicates he wants to come along. I hug his neck and he closes his eyes, enduring my embrace. Since being without Papa, there is no one to hug me. But luckily I have Brother Wolf, who allows me to hug him even if he can't hug me.

We two sneak into the caravan camp. It's a small caravan with at most 10 people. I've never seen such a small caravan, leading me to wonder what their business could be. My delay due to pondering this caused the impatient Brother Wolf to nip me in the butt. I turn in angry embarrassment and pinch his ear. He realized I was genuinely angry and cocked his head, eyes wide in confusion. I let out a resigned sigh. The great and awesome King of the Wolves is here with me skulking about, so I'll be the bigger person and let this one go. I warn him sternly not to touch my butt, or else I won't let him eat roast meat. I return to scoping out the caravan.

A large black-robed Han man takes out a wheelchair. Another purple-robed man opens the door to a carriage, letting a flash of white hit my eyes. The white is not blinding like the snow, but is instead very warm and soft, akin to shading the yellow Autumn moonlight with a touch of white. A young man's face becomes visible. His features are as clear as surface of a calm river, his form elegant like the magnolia tree. He sat there quietly but I felt like a brilliant moon had passed over the Sky Mountain and a spring breeze blew through the desert.

Transferring between the carriage and the wheelchair, the young man almost tumbled when the wheel slipped in the desert sand, but he stabilized the wheel and got on safely. The black-robed man shot others a glance so no one offered to help. What was normally a quick move took the young man a few minutes, but he remained smiling. Despite almost falling, his actions were elegant to behold, letting off an aura that he's not going to give up.

He looked up at the mountains and the nearby spring, both of which have remained standing in this desert despite the passage of thousands of years of time. The views I see everyday suddenly feels calmed by the addition of his white-robe. I guess even the vistas can be lonely.

I was staring so intently at him that I nearly forgot my purpose. I jolted myself with a reminder, followed by doubt about whether I should steal or not. I decided there was no reason not to steal, plus this young man will surely attract everyone's attention, giving me a prime opportunity.

The black-robed and purple-robed men are like twin towers standing behind the young man. Others hurried around setting up camp. I gestured for Brother Wolf to stay as I snuck over to the camels. I wanted to see what they were selling to decide if I needed anything. The salt I will have to wait until they start cooking to discover where it's being kept.

The caravans in the Gobi Desert always use camels and I'm already used to being around

them. I've never failed before with the stealth tactics I learned in the wolf pack. But I had forgotten about the horse used to pull the carriage, which had been released from the harness and was off eating grass. As I snuck near the camels, the horse suddenly let out a whine. I couldn't believe this horse knew strategy, as it allowed the enemy to get close before alerting to its presence.

The two big men rushed to protect the young man while others surrounded me. I glared at the horse, which appeared to be amused. I decided to settle my score with it later and try to escape first. I rushed away when Brother Wolf suddenly appeared and blocked two big men from chasing me.

As Brother Wolf and I ran away, suddenly a gentle lazy drawl rose from behind me "If the young miss is sure she can outrun my cocked bow with seven consecutive arrows, then go ahead and try."

I slowed and stopped for a few steps, while Brother Wolf ran back and growled low at me. He didn't know the danger we were in. I furrowed my brows to indicate he should run away. I turned to protect him.

The young man, holding an intricate small bow, lowered it when he saw me stop and turn. The purple-robed man pointed to the wolf logo branded on every camel and said "Are you blind or a courageous idiot? Daring to set upon us? Even the desert thieves stay far far away from from us."

Brother Wolf had turned agitated because I wouldn't leave. He jumped in front of me and held a vicious attack pose, ready to strike at any moment. They realized Brother Wolf was a genuine wolf and not a wolf dog, raising their alarm since wolves travel in packs. A pack of wolves can decimate any caravan. Too bad I was rash and decided to sneak in with just Brother Wolf in tow, with the rest of the wolf pack too far away to arrive in time even if called.

The young man raised his bow towards Brother Wolf, but his eyes remained fixed on me. I scrambled in front of Brother Wolf "Please don't....hurt him, it's me.....it's my idea to steal from you.....not him." Since returning the pack, other than overhearing people talking in caravans, it's been three years since I spoke with a human. I talked constantly to Brother Wolf, but perhaps I was nervous, because my words now come out in a stutter.

The young man gently asked "Just one wolf?" I thought with annoyance – if it was more than one, would I allow you to ask me all these questions. I quickly decided whether to lie or tell the truth, but recognizing that he didn't appear easily lied to. My feminine instinct indicated that he already knew the truth, and just wanted reassurance for the people around him.

"Just.....this one." My words relaxed everyone, who turned to look curiously at us, wondering how I could be companions with a wolf. The young man put down his bow and told me to control my wolf. I nodded and indicated to Brother Wolf to wait for my signal to attack. I asked the young man "So which arm are you going to cut off now?" I once overheard travelers discussing how they would cut off the arm of a thief as a warning.

The purple-robed man asked what I wanted to steal? I looked at my tattered skirt, compared to the exquisite clothes on the white-robed young man, and muttered "I

want....I want....a skirt.” The purple-robed man asked disbelievingly if that was all. I added that I also wanted salt. He humped, promising ways to get me to tell the truth.

The young man cut him off “Please go bring the outfit that was given as a present. Then take out what salt we need for today, and give the rest o her.” The purple-robed man’s expression changed “Jiu Ye....” [Ye is an honorific to mean lord, master, or sire – Jiu Ye thus means 9th Master.] He quieted once the young man gave him a look. Soon a man brought out a light blue outfit and handed it to me. I dumbly received it, and also accepted a small can of salt. I stared at the young man.

He smiled lightly and said “We are all men in this group, without any female clothing, except for this one. When we passed through Luo Lan, a friend gave it to me. I hope you like it.” I touched the fabric, which was as soft as a lambskin. This must be expensive silk, and knowing how precious this gift was, I ought to decline it. But I couldn’t and nodded my head sheepishly in accepting it.

He told me to leave. I paused and gave him a bow before taking off with Brother Wolf. A horse whine from behind caused me to turn back and glare at that horse. But I had accepted something, whereas Brother Wolf could care less about niceties. He turned back and let out a howl. The camels all collapsed, and while the horse didn’t collapse, it was quite nervous.

I let out a happy laugh. Without teaching it a lesson, the horse would believe it was a king of the desert. Brother Wolf leads tens of thousand of wolves, how dare the horse try to outsmart us. Perhaps it was the sound of my unbridled laughter, but the young man stopped and stared at me. His stare caused me to turn red and I quickly stopped laughing. He also quickly averted his gaze. He teasingly looked at Brother Wolf “This horse might not be a prize winner, but it was handpicked as a solid steed. Supposedly it can battle leopards and tigers, but perhaps that was just a baseless boast.”

I respond “Perhaps it’s not a baseless boast. The average leopard and tiger can’t even compete with my Brother Wolf.” I finish talking and hurry Brother Wolf away with me. He was staring at that solid steed with a tasty expression. If we don’t leave now, who knows what new mess will arise.

We walked far before I turned back to look. In the distance the white robe became an unforgettable sight in this desert. Regardless of whether he could still see me, I heartily waved goodbye before entering the mountains.

It’s only Brother Wolf and I next to the fire, the other wolves being afraid of the flames. Brother Wolf used to be afraid but I trained him to get used to it. The other wolves didn’t have the courage. My forcing the other wolves to get used to the fire only added to my terrible reputation amongst the wolf pack. I became the spooky warning mother wolves told their recalcitrant baby wolves who wouldn’t go to sleep at night. Hearing that they might be handed over to me, even the brattiest baby wolves dutifully did as they were told.

I opened the skirt, marveling at the dye used to get this magical blue color. The workmanship was exquisite, with intricate clouds embroidered on the sleeves. There is a sash draped with little seed pearls. Wearing it and walking, the sash and pearls will show off the elegant turn of the waist. The Luo Lan females must always wear a veil year round, so this outfit came with an accompanying blue face veil and a pearl band to secure the veil

on the head. At home when the veil is not needed, it can be lifted behind the head and create another new look, with the black hair a contrast to the pearl band and the blue veil.

I ask Brother Wolf “Isn’t this skirt too expensive a present? Why did that Jiu Ye give such a gift to a stranger? All these years and I haven’t changed my inability to turn down pretty things....” Used to my nattering, Brother Wolf had already closed his eyes and gone to sleep.

I pinched his ears but he didn’t stir. I stop my grousing and curled up next to him, drifting off into deep slumber.

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Another full moon night has arrived. I always wondered why wolves howl when it’s the full moon, which usually scares the living daylights out of desert travelers hearing the reverberating howling of the wolves. Under the blue-black night sky, the moon shines like water on the endless desert waves, bathing it in silver white light. I’m wearing my most precious blue skirt and ambling alongside Brother Wife.

The blue skirt hem moves with my footsteps, up and down, and the veil secured by the pearl head band billows in the wind. I take off my shoes to feel the still vaguely warm sand. The warmth seeps through my feet into my heart. Watching the endless horizon, I suddenly have this sensation that the world belongs to me. I can extend my wings and be free here. I face the moon and let out a howl, and Brother Wolf immediately joins me. From the distance countless wolves start howling as well.

I think I finally understand why wolves howl at the moon. The moon belongs to us, the desert belongs to us, loneliness and arrogance and sadness, it all is released in the long howl towards the moon.

Brother Wolf and I find a resting stop high up. He plops down and surveys the entire desert. This belongs to him, he is the King of this domain. Even though I’ve a bellyful of wistful thoughts, I don’t want to disturb him right now. I sit down behind him and look up to enjoy the moon.

Brother Wolf suddenly lets out a low growl. I look towards the distance but my eyes and ears are not sharp like his. From what I see it is still just calm in the desert.

After some time, I gradually hear a sound approaching in the night air. It’s coming closer, like a thousand horses thundering. Brother Wolf scoffs at me, indicating it’s not that many people. More time later, I can gradually make out a small caravan of ten or so people in the front with about one or two hundred riders in pursuit. It doesn’t look like an army, so it must be a band of thieves.

Brother Wolf looks annoyed these people disturbed his placid desert, but he lowers his head, not wanting to fight or get involved. The wolves have their wolf code, one of which is not attacking humans unless there is a dire necessity due to a food shortage or for self defense. Not because wolves are scared, but just to avoid more trouble.

I put on my shoes and fix my veil. Supposedly once the thieves set their sights on a caravan they are relentless. This battle outcome is obvious, especially with the number differential. Two caravan riders have already been cut down, their bodies trampled by

horses that continue to pursue the rest.

Suddenly a horse is cut by a thief and the rider falls to the ground. Another rider turns back and pulls the fallen rider on the same horse and continues on with the speed now slowed down considerably. The fallen rider tries to get off, but the rescuing rider looks annoyed and chops the fallen rider's neck with his hand, causing the fallen rider to go limp on the horse.

My eyes seem to be clouded by a veil of blood lust, and my nostrils seem to smell the sweet wetness of blood. Three years ago, the thundering sound of hooves, once again returns to my ears. I can't help but stand up and blankly stare down.

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Yu Dan and I are riding the most powerful horse in the entire Xiong Nu. After riding for two days and two nights, we still haven't reached the Han dynasty or shaken the pursuers. Yu Dan's guards slowly die one by one, until it's just the two of us left. I'm afraid I will soon fall off the horse, not sure if it will hurt to be trampled under their hooves. Yi Zhi Xie, do you really want to kill Papa and us? If you kill Papa, I will hate you forever.

"Yu Jin, I am going to prick the horse flank with this knife and it will have a burst of speed. Once I shake the pursuing army, I will let you off the horse and you escape alone. When you were a child, didn't you live in this desert like a wolf? You need to become a wolf again, you need to escape from the hunters behind us."

"What about you? Papa told us to escape to the Central Plains together."

"I have a horse! I can run faster than you. After I reach the Central Plains, I will come back for you." Yu Dan smiles his usual broad smile. I look at his smiling face and suddenly become afraid. I keep shaking my head no.

Yu Dan forces me off the horse. I chase behind him in the desert, crying and wailing loudly "Please don't leave me behind. Let's escape together." Yu Dan turns back and begs me "Yu Jin, please just let listen to me this once. Just listen to me one time. I promise to come back and retrieve you. So please start running away!"

I stare at him for a second before taking a deep breath and nodding my head vigorously. I turn and start running like crazy. Behind me Yu Dan turns his horse in the opposite direction. Turning around, under the moonlit darkness, the distance between us increases. He turns around to look at me, smiling as he waves at me. In the end we disappear separately into the darkness of the desert.

All I remember is that the horse ran very fast. But I forgot that the horse had already been running for two days and two nights, and was also bleeding. How long can it last? Plus the scent of the blood would lure those chasing after us to continue pursuing him, unaware that I had already run off alone.

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The thieves appear to enjoy this game, not attacking directly but circling the caravan and enclosing everyone. Seeing this, I made a sudden decision. This time I would change the fates. I shoot Brother Wolf a look and let out a howl into the distance. Brother Wolf got up and shook himself off and then let out a howl towards his pack.

Suddenly howls arose everywhere as wolves began to appear one by one. More and more appear until their eyes in the darkness appear to be the lights leading the way to hell. Not sure which ethnicity the thieves are, but I don't understand their language. They quickly stop encircling the caravan and gather together to look for a way out. But the wolves have surrounded everyone. The wolves look at them, with the thieves unwilling to attack knowing the relentless battle to come.

The caravan group also assembles, and even though the numbers are small, it's clear they have a strong desire to survive. I start to suspect my initial assessment. Facing deadly thieves and fierce wolves, how can a regular caravan of merchants gather together so efficiently?

The howling has stopped and the thieves have also fallen silent. In the silence, there is irony, knowing that the hunter thieves have so quickly become the prey. They are probably thinking about using fire, but there are no kindling nearby.

The thieves are about to light a fire when I pat Brother Wolf on the back. "Looks like they don't want to kill anyone anymore. Let the pack open a path for them to leave." Brother Wolf puts on his most powerful stance and orders the pack to clear a path.

Initially in the confusion no one saw us standing up high, but when Brother Wolf let out a howl to order the pack, everyone turned towards us. Brother Wolf boldly walked forward until he was standing at the ledge and looking down on everyone. His proud stance, with his glittering silver fur, gave off a powerful aura.

I angrily kick him, knowing how he loves to show off. Ay, who knows how many female wolves' hearts will be broken right here tonight.

The pack has already opened a path but the thieves remain rooted to their spots, staring as us and then at the pack. I got impatient and yelled in Han language "Already gave you a chance to live, why haven't you taken it and left?" The thieves are silent for a moment and then let out a whoop, getting off their horses and bowing down to us on their knees. I realize the thieves are both afraid of the wolves but also in awe of the wolves' prowess. The thieves get back on their horses and follow the path to leave.

After the dust settled, I howl towards the wolf pack, telling them to disperse and keep doing whatever they were doing. They don't respect me like they do Brother Wolf, so they hump at me and bare their teeth a bit before dispersing. To a human's ears, it was probably a lot of randomly howling.

I look at the caravan and have no desire to converse with them. I signal Brother Wolf and we get off the cliff and take off. Suddenly I hear horse hooves behind me "Thank you, young lady, for saving our lives." I nodded my head but kept on running, hoping to lose them.

"Young lady, please wait! After being pursued by the thieves, we've lost our way. Can you give us directions?"

Hearing this, I ask Brother Wolf to stop and turn to face them. Their horses refuse to get closer when Brother Wolf is here. I walk forward and they quickly get off their horses. With my Luo Lan outfit, they perform a Luo Lan formality towards me, asking me in Luo Lan language how I am doing. I take off my veil "I'm wearing a Luo Lan outfit but I am

not a Luo Lan citizen. I also don't understand their language."

A man asked "You are a Han" I thought about it. Am I? Papa said his daughter must be a Han person, so I supposed I am a Han. I nod my head.

A voice spoke up from the back "We are spice merchants from Chang An. May I ask where, young lady, you are from?" Looking towards him, I recognize that he was the person who did the saving (turning the horse around to rescue the fallen rider).

To my surprise, he turned out to be a young man of sixteen or seventeen. His physique is as straight as a reed, with a strong masculine aura. Sharp eyebrows followed by dark eyes that shine like the stars are currently studying me. He smiles, with an expression like he doesn't have a worry in this world. I avoid his piercing gaze and look at the ground.

He can sense my discomfort, but he continues to just stare at me without a care. A middle aged man next to him steps up and laughs "Our utmost gratitude to you. Young lady, with your rich attire and uncommon presence, normally we ought not offer shallow material gifts, but we happen to have a pair of pearl earrings that would be a great complement to your outfit. If you don't mind." He puts a box before me.

I shake my head "I have no use for this. If you have any female clothes, I could use a set." The men turn and give each other looks. "If you don't have any, that's fine. Where do you want to go?" The middle aged man spoke "We want to go to Dun Huang city, and from there return to Chang An." I inform them "From here until the Min Sa Mountain Yue Ya Spring is a four day trip. I will lead you only to there."

Everyone looks concerned and worried, with the exception of the young man, who continues to look at me with a self-satisfied half smile on his face. The middle aged man explained that they lost most of their provisions, so their supply might not last until reaching the Yue Ya Spring. I explained my estimate was my travel time. Since they have horses, we can cut down one or two days time. Everyone looks relieved.

They decide to rest now and eat, replenishing their energy after being chased by thieves for a day and a night. They ask my opinion. "I spend all day wandering this desert. I have nothing to do, so do what you wish." I secretly was shocked at how this small band of people were chased by thieves for one day and one night. If the thieves weren't more familiar with the terrain, who knows which party will be victorious.

I ordered Brother Wolf to leave, but make sure a few small wolves trail me. He didn't understand my weird relationship with humans, so he just licked my hand before bounding away.

The caravan takes out food and water, while I sit a distance away, wrapping my arms around my knees on the sandy dune. There are many people, but an awkward silence pervades. I can sense they are not an ordinary merchant caravan, but that has nothing to do with me. I care not to probe into who they really are. Plus they are slightly apprehensive about me, not sure if it's because I am with the wolves, or because my identity is suspicious. I'm wearing a lavish Luo Lan outfit, appearing in the Xi Yu desert but claiming to be a Han person, without any explanation of where I came from.

The man who wanted to give me the earrings walked over and offered me a biscuit. The delicious scent caused my mouth to water and I shyly accepted it and thanked him.

He laughed “It is us who need to thank you. You can call me Uncle Chen.” He pointed around and started introducing everyone. When he finished introducing everyone except one, he looked toward the silent young man sitting before us, who didn’t speak immediately. I shot him a wary look and he gave a small smile and said “Call me Xiao Huo.”

I saw everyone smiling and staring at me. “My name is Yu.....Jin Yu. You can call me Ah Yu.” Other than running into Jiu Ye near the Yue Ya Spring, this is the only other time in three years I’ve interacted with humans. As my name was coming out, I decided to give myself a new one. From now on, there is no Yu Jin, there is only Jin Yu.

After resting, the caravan readies to leave. They let two smaller people ride one horse and give one to me. “I don’t know how to ride a horse.” Everyone looks at me until Xiao Huo speaks up “You can ride with me!” After he said that, everyone looks at me in alarm.

I hesitate, and then nodded my head. Everyone’s worried look disappears, but they shoot me apologetic looks. Even though the people of the Xi Yu region are more open, an unfamiliar man and woman sharing a horse is still rare. Xiao Huo appears to be fine with it, only smiling at me and bowing “Thank you, Ms Jin Yu!”

After Xiao Huo gets on the horse, he pulls me up. As I hold his hand, I think to myself that this is a hand that holds a sword and whip on a daily basis, with deep callous. From it comes a sense of strength and determination, and from where his callous is, this man must have practiced archery for many years. Sitting behind him on the horse, our bodies are ramrod straight. Others looking at us know they can’t hurry us along, so the pace progresses slowly.

Xiao Huo finally spoke up “We can’t be like this. If I shift the horse, you’ll fall down for sure.” Even though his words appear casual, his voice with a hint of nervousness betrays him. I secretly smile and my awkwardness turns into teasing him for being not as sure of himself as he appears. I shift a little and reach out to grab his clothes. “This will do.”

He immediately urged his horse into a gallop and so did everyone else. After awhile, he suddenly mumbled in a low voice “You’ll have to think of another way. If you keep tugging on my clothes, I will enter Dun Huang city with my arms bare.”

I actually already realized that I was tugging his clothes down, and purposely wanted to see what he would do about it. All I did was prepare for the possibility of falling off the horse. I tamped down the urge to laugh and said “Why do I have to think of a solution? Why can’t you think of one?”

He laughs softly “I do have a solution, but if I say it, you’ll think I’m taking advantage of you. Which is why I asked you for a solution.”

I replied “I don’t have any good ideas, so tell me yours. If it’s good we’ll do it, if not then you’ll just end up with a bare arms!”

He didn’t say a word, suddenly turning around and grabs my arms, wrapping it around his waist. I’m not comfortable on a horse so I don’t dare make any big struggle. What he did forced my entire body forward until I was pressed completely against his back. With that, he was holding one of my arms while my other arm went around his waist. With the movement of the horse causing our bodies to be tightly pressed against each other, it was

as intimate as could be.

My ears started to burn up. With embarrassment and outrage, I held his waist but straightened my body. “Is this how you Chang An people treat a person who rescued you?” He answered with annoyance “It’s better than letting you fall off a horse.” I can’t find a proper retort so I just give a cold humph and sat there silently. But my anger continued to boil, so I tighten my arm to choke his waist. But he acted like there was nothing different, only purposefully urging the horse on. I thought to myself, this guy sure can endure pain. And after awhile, I felt bad and slowly released my hold on him.

Once again riding a horse with someone, my mind started to drift. Plus I didn’t sleep last night, so like I did when I was small, I instinctively grabbed Xiao Huo’s waist and rested my head against his back as I fall sleep. When I suddenly woke up, my face is burning hot and I immediately straighten my body and want to let go of him. He can sense my intention, only holding down my arm even more firmly “Be careful and don’t fall down.” I force my embarrassment away and pretended nothing is wrong, slowing letting go of his waist. But inside I feel this inexplicable feeling.

After a day of hard riding, we stop for a rest. Xiao Huo sees me with my head lowered and not talking. He walks over and sits down next to me. He smiles “I see that you are a very perceptive person, so why do you trust me so much? Aren’t you worried I would sell you?”

My face turns red again and I glare at him. I get up and move elsewhere to sit down. It is odd. I can tell their identities are suspect, but I have this gut feeling that he won’t harm me. This person’s proud arrogance means he wouldn’t do anything underhanded.

Xiao Huo brought some food over and sat down next to me again. He passed me some biscuits. I gave him a warning glance and silently accepted the food. The little bit of caution in his eyes also dissipate, leaving only a twinkling gaze.

Due to missing their homeland, the folks start discussing life in Chang An, painting it as wondrous and lavish. With wide clean streets, great artisans, bustling markets, talented scholars, seductive performers, courageous generals, elegant ladies, fragrant wine, and delicious food. The best of everything on earth can be found in Chang An. It’s like everything one could possibly want is right there.

I listen intently with conflicting emotions. That place feels familiar yet foreign. If I follow Papa’s wish, perhaps I would already be living there with Papa right now, and not wandering the Gobi Desert all alone.

When there are a lot of people, Xiao Huo doesn’t talk much. He just silently listens to everyone’s descriptions. Only when we are alone on the horse does he say to me “The Chang An they describe is the glittering side of it. Not everyone experiences the wonders they describe.” I indicated that I understood what he is trying to convey.

Two days later, we say our farewells at the Yue Ya Spring. I suddenly have a new idea. When they want to thank me again, I boldly ask them for money, as payment for leading them here. Xiao Huo stops for a moment and then smiles. He tossed a bag of coins to me. It looks like he wants to say something, but he doesn’t. He finally tells me “Chang An is not like Xi Yu, you have to be careful.” I nodded and left with the bag of coins I earned in

hand.

After walking a distance away, I finally give in and turn back around. I thought I would see a departing back, but to my surprise he didn't leave. He sat on the horse, watching me off from a distance. Our eyes met and his face registered the look of happy surprise. My heart thumped, and then I quickly turned my head and hurried off.

Since separating from Xiao Huo's caravan, I followed the wolf pack from the Gobi to the great grassy plains, and from the plains back to the desert. At night I would hold the pack of coins, lost in thought. I will miss Brother Wolf and the wolves, the yellow sandy desert, the verdant land and the Hu Yang Forest. But am I to spend the rest of my life living here with these wolves? Just like Papa said, I am a human, I cannot be a wolf anymore.

After much deliberation, I decided to leave. Brother Wolf's life will have peaks and valleys, with innumerable challenges in the future. Perhaps the largest wolf kingdom in the history of the Xi Yu territory awaits him. But my life is just starting. My chance to live was hard to come by. So no matter if the future holds sour or sweet, spicy or bitter, I decide to taste it. Just like those herding songs sing about, a precious blade needs sharpening and a great set of pipes need to keep singing. A life without any experience is sure to be dreary, like a night sky without any stars.

I want to go to Chang An, to see the Han dynasty Papa spoke so much about. Perhaps I can become the beautiful Han lady of Papa's dreams.

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 1 - Chapter 3

Chapter 3: Reunion

I paid money in Dun Huang city to travel with a caravan of merchants going to Chang An. With everything I own in hand, I got on a carriage. Though the only thing worth anything is my Luo Lan outfit. Papa told me a lot about Chang An, and I imagined it often, but I was still stunned by its majesty and grandeur. With tree-lined wide-streets and grand homes, the city was beautiful. I held my bag and wandered the streets, so thrilled that every corner and bridge would get me excited. I finally started to understand Papa's feelings. Seeing such rich surroundings from childhood makes it hard to fall in love with the simplicity of the tents, where everywhere you look there is only sheep or cows.

It was dusk before I realized I needed to find a place to rest. Counting my coins, I had enough for at most ten days at the cheapest inn where I was staying. I missed the days of not needing money in Xi Yu. Laying in the bed in the darkness, I was worried for a bit before laughing. Chang An is such a vast city, with so much to do that can sustain a livelihood. Am I any worse than anyone else? I have hands and feet, would I starve? I decided to stop lamenting the Heavens!

After walking through the city a total of three times, I started to doubt if I could earn a living. Maid or dancing girl, these require selling myself and I refuse to live a life controlled by others. I don't know embroidering or sewing, or any of the female skills. The worst is that I don't have a guarantor. A store almost hired me to do their books but once I couldn't produce a guarantor they didn't want to take the chance on me. I tried looking for Xiao Huo and his people, to be my guarantor. But everyone I asked, no one had heard of such spice merchants. I muttered a curse to Xiao Huo, who clearly lied to me.

A holiday is approaching and the stores are fragrantly decorated. I've used up all my coin and haven't eaten anything since yesterday, with nowhere to go tonight. I grab my things and head out of the city, to a nearby forest to bed down for the night. If I can start a fire, at least I'll be warm. If I'm lucky I can snare a rabbit and get some dinner. Being hungry feels terrible.

When I'm feeling down, I wonder if it was the right decision to come here. Should I sell my Luo Lan outfit and get enough money to return to the Xi Yu? But then I feel like I gave up. Papa wouldn't believe that the daughter he raised like a Han couldn't survive in Chang An. When I reached the forest, I discovered lots of people were thinking the same thing as me, with the ground crowded with beggars. I saw a tree and was about to settle in when a beggar yelled "You damn girl! Do you know any manners? That's your grandpa,

my spot.”

I glared at him. He didn’t pee on the spot like a wolf, so how should I know. It was a mistake only, but I didn’t want to make a scene. As I turned to leave, another beggar gave me a dark look, asking me to sing for him and he’ll offer me a place to sleep next to him. I turn and am ready to pull out my dagger when suddenly another young beggar arrives bearing a jug of good fragrant wine. All the attention of the beggars turn to him and start drinking, forgetting about me.

An old beggar walks up “Little girl, in this lifetime, there are no pits you can’t cross, and nothing you can’t endure. They don’t mean anything, so just let it go. If you don’t mind, want to go warm yourself by the fire with an old beggar like me?” He takes out two buns and starts to warm it by the fire, and hands me a pot of wine to drink. I hesitate, explaining that we are strangers, so why he is so nice to me. That young beggar helping me back there, I was already so grateful.

His eyes twinkle and he explains that even the Emperor needs a Prime Minister to assist, and people endure situations and need help. I thank him and accept the wine and bun. Later than night, the young beggar tells me that if I go knock on doors asking to wash clothing, perhaps I can find work. I have the strength so I decide to try my luck tomorrow. I rush into the city at dawn, in such a hurry that it was late when I realized I left my bag at the beggar camp. But I figured it was safe with the old beggar and his grandson, and I had promised them I would go back tonight. The most important thing is finding a job.

Every door rejects me, until a nice lady explains that the houses all give their wash to familiar people. A burly man waves me away, explaining someone is already washing clothes for this house. I ask if they need other work done, and a seductively made up woman walks out of that residence and overhears me. She looks me up and down and confirms that I am not a local. She compliments me on speaking the Chang An dialect with no accent. I truthfully reveal that I’ve been here almost half a month now, and I’m a fast learner.

She asks if I have relatives here and I shake my head. She invites me in to sweep the courtyard in exchange for some steamed buns. I happily accept, thanking the mistress. She tells me to call her Hong Gu, promising that if I did a good job, we might see each other more in the future. After I finish my chores, she compliments me on my quick hands. She brings out hot tea and steamed buns, which I shovel down since I’ve not eaten all morning. Hong Gu smiles and watches me. When I’m half full, I remember the old and young beggar. I ask Hong Gu if I can take the rest of the buns with me.

Hong Gu looked shocked and asked why? I explain that I wanted to save it to eat later. She smiled and offered me more tea as she has the buns packed up. I take a few sips of tea and suddenly don’t feel right. My head starts spinning and my legs grow weak. I knew what had happened but acted like nothing was wrong. I got up “My grandpa is waiting for me to return. If the buns are ready, I’ll be going now.”

As I rushed out, two burly men stood at the front door. I pulled out my dagger but my body is already falling forward. Hong Gu stands by the door and smiles “If you’re tired you can rest here. I’m sure there is no grandpa waiting for you, so why rush?”

The two men walk over and I try to stab them but they take away my dagger. I collapse on

the ground, with the last thing I hear being Hong Gu “What a sharp little gal! After drinking the drug, it took her that long to collapse. Feed her more of it and make sure she’s secured or else I’ll have your hide!”

I don’t know how long I’ve been unconscious, waking up to find myself not alone. Another girl is locked in the same room as me. She has a pretty face and an elegant demeanor. She hurries to bring me water now that I am awake. I observe her but don’t accept the water. Her eyes grow red rimmed “This water doesn’t have any drug in it. It’s not necessary anyways. It’s well secured here, you can’t escape.”

I reply “I’m not thirsty”, so she puts the water down and huddle against the other wall again. I move my limbs, which are all intact, but has no strength in them. Clearly they gave me yet another drug. After I clear my mind, I tell the girl “My name is Jin Yu, I was drugged by a woman named Hong Gu. What about you?” She replies “I am Fang Ru, my stepmother sold me here” and then starts crying. I have no patience to comfort her, only asking “Do you know where this place is? Why do they want me?” Fang Ru explains that this place is called Luo Yu Fang (Luo Yu House), one of more famous dancing parlors in Chang An city. I was captured probably because I am pretty.,

I don’t know whether to be happy or sad. From a hairy wolf girl into a lovely young woman under Papa’s tutelage, I’ve finally been acknowledged by outsiders, especially someone as seductive as Hong Gu. So it turns out that my beauty is enough to become a problem. But I never used my looks to harm anyone before, and it turns around and harms me first. I ask “Do they want me to prostitute myself?” Fang Ru shakes her head “This place is a house of dancing and performance, not a brothel. The girls here sell their talents, not their body. But even then, if there is someone very rich or powerful, you might not be able to refuse. You can only hope someone buys your freedom, or if you are so talented at dancing and performing, you’ll have special status and can even enter the Palace.”

I want to ask more when the door suddenly opens and the two burly men walk in. Fang Yu cries that she won’t go. Hong Gu enters, muttering that Fang Ru has already tried many times to kill herself and been punished, she ought to just behave and get dressed to go learn song and dance with the other girls. She’s dragged out, despite her frantically reaching for anything to grab onto. I watch this scene without blinking an eye. Hong Gu watches me and appears impressed “You ought to know where this place is by now. And yet you don’t seem scared or shocked, you don’t cry or make a scene. Have you given up, or planning something else?”

I remain silent for a moment before responding “Is being scared of any use? Is crying of any use? Will fear and tears cause you to release me? It’ll just earn me whipping or other punishments. The end result is the same. I’ll pick the less painful route and do as you want.”

Hong Gu is stunned for a moment, before sharing the anecdote about how people who drown really are close to shore and can even float if they stopped struggling, but they are so scared that their struggles end up dooming them. I look at Hong Gu and we reach a mutual understanding. She asks for my name. I tell her that I am Jin Yu. Hong Gu will prepare my own room, but before leaving, she states that it was my luck to run into her. If I became a beggar, with my looks, I would never escape the dangers on the street.

I learn to dance, sing, play the flute, embroider. The dancing is the easiest for me, since the Xiong Mu are passionate and love to dance. I've danced around the fire since I was a child thousands of times, and been taught by the Xiong Nu's most esteemed court dance instructor. It's the flute playing and embroidering that gives me a headache.

Not sure what other girls are thinking, but I'm really getting into this. I often practice when I'm alone, especially under the moonlight. Too bad I can't even play a single tune completely, sounding more like a ghost wailing. But I'm pretty stoked, always thinking about how Brother Wolf might like this, and how I plan to play for him when there is a full moon.

The girls in the house complain often to Hong Gu, but she always takes my side. She even berates those who tattle on me, telling them to work even half as hard as me, they'd be famous all over Chang An. To be honest, I ought to despise Hong Gu, but I can't seem to. She's seductive and smart without being petty, and when she talks it's clear she thinks deeply about things.

The days slip by until I can somewhat play the tune Bai To Ying. A new year is arriving, which means gathering with relatives. Even the most flirty man has to go home, so the usually busy dancing house becomes empty. In a house where no one has relatives, the girls decide to celebrate the holidays with as much energy as possible. Even Hong Gu is the same, willing to spend hard earned money to decorate the house inside out with red. Even if it's garish, at least it's colorful and cheerful.

New Year's Eve, Hong Gu orders the house securely locked and summons all twenty some of us girls to the hall. She prepared food and wine and wants us all the eat, drink, and be merry. Whether out of sadness or joy, it doesn't matter, as everyone celebrates with gusto, drinking shot after shot proffered. I never had any tolerance, so after a few cups of gao liang wine, I was already dizzy and crawled over to the side to plop down. When I regained some sense, I felt like I couldn't breath. Turned out Fang Ru was so drunk she mistook my chest for a pillow and was sleeping on it.

Looking around, everyone was collapsed all over the place, draped and propped on others. The room was warm and felt peaceful. I gently moved Fang Ru's head aside and gave her a pillow. I closed my eyes and went back to sleep.

As I was fixing my skirt, I looked out the window and saw Hong Gu bowing before two men, one older and one younger. They were asking her rapid fire questions, and I can hear bits and pieces ".....girl.....looks.....three months ago.....Boss....." I can't see Hong Gu's face but I can sense her shock. The two men walk in my direction and Hong Gu runs after them, yelling at us to all get up. The girls all start to get up, and I nudge the really drunk ones awake. The men enter and start surveying us.

The best singer in the house, Shuang Shuang, clearly recognizes them and gives a smiling bow "The first day of the new year and we have honored visitors. This means the house will surely have a smooth year. Shaung Er wishes Wu Ye a happy new year and good health."

Wu Ye's tight expression relaxes a bit, then tightens again as he nods at Shuang Shuang. I was hiding behind a beam, so when he finally spots me, his face changes and he quickly asks Hong Gu who I was and how long I had been here. Hong Gu turns white and doesn't

answer, so Wu Ye demands the truth now. Hong Gu lowers her head and explains that I am from out of town and came to this house three months ago. Wu Ye asked me if this is true and I confirm it is.

Wu Ye mutters that this ought to be correct – looks, timing, background, it all fits. He explains to Hong Gu that the Big Boss has been looking for me for the past two weeks. Because Wu Ye doesn't work directly for the Big Boss, he doesn't know why he's looking for me. He tells Hong Gu that whatever trouble she created, she'll have to deal with the consequences herself.

Hong Gu tells all the girls to leave except for me, and then she gets on her knees. I hurry to help her up "Hong Gu, please don't be afraid. I don't know that Wu Ye person, or the Big Boss he speaks of. But you just relax. There is no animosity between us. All I know is that you've fed, clothed, and housed me for the past few months, and taught me lots of fun new things." I thought to myself, being new to Chang An, it's better to have one less enemy. Plus Hong Gu didn't actually cause me any hard. It's better to let it go in this case.

Hong Gu's eyes fill with tears and her voice becomes hard "Xiao Yu, thank you for having such a big heart. I won't say any useless crap now. I owe you one, and I will always remember it." She takes out a pill and gave it to me. I swallow it and she explains that my strength will slowly return. But because I've been drugged for so long, it'll take a few days. I smile, willing to wait. She gratefully nods and takes out a cloth to wipe my face and fix my hair and skirt. She takes my hand and leads me outside. Wu Ye sees our joined hands and looks less stern, taking me away.

I ride in the same carriage as Hong Gu, still not sure what is happening, only knowing we are headed to meet someone who is looking for a person like me. This person appeared to be a very revered person in Chang An, because even one of his subordinates who is not close to him could get Shuang Shuang bowing in earnest and Hong Gu shaking in fear. "Hong Gu, who is this Big Boss that Wu Ye speaks of?" Hong Gu is shocked "You don't know the Big Boss of the Shi Enterprises?"

I shake my head and Hong Gu is even more confused. "It's been years since the Big Boss asked about the little business dealings going on in Chang An. The dancing house I run is owned by Shi Enterprises. Every year I have to remit my earnings to Shi Enterprises. In the past they used to micro-manage, but these last few years they've been hands off as long as we follow the rules." I ask what rules, and she sheepishly replies "Quite a few rules, such as, not to abduct or swindle an honest girl into this profession."

I laugh, knowing now why she's so scared, because she broke one of the rules. I assure her that I'm not going to say anything. Hong Gu quickly tries to explain "Once is enough, I'll never do it again. I was just impatient, wanting to become the most famous dancing house in Chang An, and needing talent to do it. Normally the girls have the looks but the not the smarts, or vice versa, so when I saw you, I got greedy and did something wrong, Afterwards I've been afraid of the Big Boss hearing about it, but it was already too late."

I can see that she is sincere and quickly change the topic, asking her to tell me more about this Shi Enterprises. Hong Gu explains "I don't know much because they are low key. I've lived in Chang An since I was a child, and have met plenty of people, but I've never met the Big Boss. Heard from elders that the enterprise started generations ago selling rock

and stone, growing bigger and bigger until they owned almost half the businesses in this city. One day they suddenly stopped expanding the enterprise, letting go of some businesses and becoming more withdrawn. The past few years one rarely hears about them. If I didn't have to pay money to them every year, I would almost forget that the dance house belonged to the Shi Enterprises. Even if they are not as big as they once were, still no one in Chang An would dare cross them."

I thought – a mysterious merchant in Chang An who knows what I look like? My mind flashed to riding the horse with Xiao Huo. Could it be him? The carriage stopped outside a residence and we got out. An old man opened the door and welcomed us in, with Wu Ye and Hong Gu bowing respectfully to him. He checks me out and Wu Ye confirms that he believes I'm the one, and this entire time I've been right under their nose. The man doesn't know if I'm the one, but the two earlier were sent away moments after entering.

We sit in a small waiting room, and Wu Ye is even politely bowing to the little boy who brings us tea. The old man returns beaming, confirming that this time it's the right girl. He sends the other two away to await either reward or punishment from the Big Boss and gestures for me to follow him. Hong Gu indicates that I should go, plus I'm curious if this Big Boss is Xiao Huo or not, so I quickly follow.

After walking for awhile, suddenly the hallway fills with light and beyond the distance is a lake and a copse of trees, giving off a sense of energy and life. This house looks ordinary from the front, but surprisingly has such grandeur inside. Past the lake the scenery is so lively, even in this dead of Winter the trees still feel vibrant, causing my mood to lift.

The old man turns and notices me "If you like, come back and play next time. I also love this bamboo forest, cool in the Summer and lively in the Winter. This here is the Bamboo Residence, beyond the lake there is the Plum Blossom Garden, the Orchid Pavilion, and the Crysanthemum Suite." I nodded and ran to catch up to him.

At the end of the Bamboo Forest is a small courtyard and the old man indicates for me to enter alone. Inside are more bamboos with some pigeons resting on it. A blue-robed man is sitting there facing the sun, with a pigeon on his knee, a warming pot next to him. Seeing the steam from the pot surrounding him, it feels slightly like a dream. Whether in the desert or here in Chang An, wherever he is at, even the most ordinary of surroundings becomes something unforgettable.

Watching this scene, I don't dare make a sound, only turning my eyes to follow his gaze towards the sun. The Winter sun blinds me slightly so I squint, and when I look back at him, he's looking directly at me. He points to the chair next to him and smilingly asks "Is Chang An fun?"

One simple yet familiar question causes my heart to warm immediately, and all my bellyful of questions fall by the wayside. Those questions aren't important, what's important is that I've reunited with him here.

I easily sit down next to him "First thing I did was fill my stomach, and then later I just lolled about in Hong Gu's house. I haven't played anywhere yet!"

He gives a small crooked smile "I see you're doing fine. Hong Gu has taught you well. If you walk out now, you actually have a few shades resembling a quality gently bred young

lady.”

I remember how haggard I looked when I met him at the Yue Ya Spring, leaving me slightly angry and embarrassed “I’ve always been quality, it’s just that people need clothes like a horse needs a bridle.”

A little boy brought out a table and tea, and I notice it’s the young beggar from the forest, Go Wa Zi (Little Puppy). I’m happy to see him but he’s serious towards me “Call me Shi Feng, not Little Puppy. That was a name used when I was in dire straits.” I agreed and he explained that he was here because Jiu Ye brought him back. He left and Jiu Ye explained “Because Shi Feng’s grandpa fell ill, he had no choice but to sell the outfit you left with them. Luckily the owner of the pawn store was with me on that trip to Xi Yu and recognized it, conveying this to me. I saw how filial Xiao Feng was, and also bright, so kept him by my side.”

I nod, realizing this was how my situation in Chang An was discovered. I asked about his grandpa and was told age and weather laid him low, but with rest and medicine he will recover. When Jiu Ye asked if Hong Gu harmed me, I quickly said no. He laughed at my nervousness, and I explained that who knows what the punishment is like in Chang An. If people get arms cut off as punishment, it will be a waste of pretty Hong Gu.

Jiu Ye thought “This isn’t just between you and Hong Gu. If it’s not handled, who knows if other girls will suffer in the future.” I counter “Hong Gu has already promised me never to do it again. Is there a mutually beneficial solution?” Jiu Ye decides to let Wu Ye handle it since it’s under his purview, rather than waste time thinking about it now.

The Winter sun sets early and it’s starting to get cold. I look at his legs and say “I’m feeling cold.” He lets the pigeon fly off before turning his wheelchair around, gesturing for me to go first. I want to assist but remember what happened in the desert so I quickly withdraw my hand. As we approach the door, it opens by itself, startling me. Jiu Ye explains there is a mechanism triggered by his wheelchair reaching the door which allows it to open.

Inside the residence, it’s exquisitely appointed, with everything at the perfect height for someone in a wheelchair to access. He invites me to sit at the table with a snack on it, which reminds me that I haven’t eaten all day, and my grumbling stomach gives my hunger away. He’s making tea and turns to look at me, and I say in embarrassment “You never heard someone’s stomach growl before? I’m hungry, can I eat the snack?” He instead orders dinner prepared, asking what I want.

I don’t know how to order, but I want meat. Lots and lots of meat, and not diced into tiny little cubes or slivers like at Hong Gu’s. He pulls a knob and Xiao Feng comes running in, getting the order for dinner. He put the tea pot on his thighs and wheels it over, not spilling anything. He pours me a cup and I take a sip while nibbling on a snack. He seemed happy, explaining he rarely has visitors, and this is the first time he’s made tea for someone.

I nod “You must have a lot of siblings, right? Is there a Shi (10) Ye behind you?” [Jiu is the number 9] He softly answered “It’s just me, even though father wanted a large family. Since I was small everyone called me Jiu Ye for luck, so it’s stuck.”

I swallow my bite “My family is me and a pack of wolves. The one you saw that day is

just my younger brother (wolf).”

He smiled “I heard your name is Jin Yu?” I nod “And you?”

“Meng Xi Mo.” I was shocked “Your last name is not Shi? But you are the Big Boss of the Shi Enterprises?” He asked “Who told you the owner of the Shi Enterprises has the last name Shi?”

I stuck my tongue out “I saw the residence here is called Shi Estate, that’s why. Xi Mo. Xi (West) Mo (Desert), the Western part of the desert. Your name doesn’t sound like a Central Plains name.”

He counters “Your name is Jin (Gold) Yu (Jade). I don’t see you draped in jewels and riches.”

I smile “Not now, but someday I will be.”

Xiao Feng brings in a platter of food and seeing how excited I am, he tells me to dig in first since he’s not hungry. I devour just the meat and ignore the vegetables, so he comes over and pushes it back towards me. “Eat some vegetables.” I ignore the veggies still. He said again “Girls need to eat more vegetables to be pretty.” I looked alarmed, was he joking or telling the truth? He looked serious, so wavering between delicious food and beauty, I finally picked up the vegetables. He smiled and looked out the window.

Eating is always a happy thing, and I hold my full stomach and feel like life is but as happy as now.

I decide to be ballsy and tell Jiu Ye to take responsibility for me since he’s caused so much commotion Hong Gu will surely not take me back anymore. He just smiles at me but doesn’t respond. I explain I can write, count, is strong and not stupid. Surely he can use me at one of the businesses to help in a shop. He asks if I want to stay in Chang An? For now I do, not sure when I’ll leave one day.

He lets me stay here while deciding what suits me to do. He tells me to think about what I like to do. I won’t stay here without earning it, promising to do whatever Xiao Feng does to earn my keep. He shakes his head, calling me his guest....a reunited old friend.

In a few days I’ve learned my way around the Shi Residence, seeing the black-robed and purple-robed man from the Yue Ya Spring. One is called Shi Jing Yen (Careful Words) and one is called Shi Sheng Xing (Cautious Actions). I smile at how apropos one name is, and how not suitable the other name is.

Hearing I’m staying in the Bamboo Residence, Jing Yen is shocked since Jiu Ye loves his solitude and even Xiao Feng and those folks don’t spend the night there. Those two, plus the Shi Enterprises Manager Shi Tian Cao, together oversee all the Shi businesses. They come every morning to report to Jiu Ye, and the little porter boys all eavesdrop. It’s cute their names are Feng (Wind), Yu (Rain), Lei (Thunder), and Dian (Lightning), which is easy to remember. I always leave to avoid hearing anything. Today I decide to visit Hong Gu because I miss her.

Shi Buo (the old man butler) worries I’m wearing too little on a snowy day, and I tell him I’m afraid of only being hungry, this cold doesn’t faze me. The snow has stopped but the wind and the carriage wheels whips the fallen snow all around, with most people walking

huddling to stay warm. I order the carriage to slow and not throw more snow on people.

I return to the Luo Yu House and find the red lanterns are gone, hearing people exclaim that the House hasn't opened for business in days. Hong Gu welcomes me, explaining that her mistake is leaving Wu Ye deciding what to do. She's so worried and has decided not to open for business in the meantime. I explain that Wu Ye wants to help her, which is why he's racking his brains for a good solution. Hong Gu thanks me for protecting her.

She's curious about the Big Boss but I tell her to worry about her situation and stop asking about non pertinent matters. She smiles, knowing I don't want to answer, so she doesn't push. But she wants to know why the Big Boss was looking for me. I explain we've met before, thought I didn't know that he was in Chang An. Hong Gu says "People can't avoid fate."

A maid comes and informs us that Shuang Shuang, the number one singer, has decided to jump ship and go work for Tian Xian House since this place isn't doing business. Hong Gu explains that Tian Xian House used to also be owned by Shi Enterprises, but not anymore. And recently it keeps growing bigger and more well known. Perhaps soon Chang An's dancing houses will all be consolidated into one.

She doesn't want to talk about these business worries now. Since the business is shuttered, she takes all the girls out to go flower watching. Everyone bundles up in layers except for me, leaving Hong Gu admiring not my fortitude, but how it allows me to still look feminine when they are all wrapped into bundles.

As the carriage nears the city gates, suddenly everyone parts and our carriage also pulls over. I stick my head out, curious. Hong Gu says this is nothing compared to when the Emperor passes through. I look and from far away, a few young men in horses are riding down the lane. All are strapping, dressed in fine clothes, dashing on the horse – clearly young men with bright futures and riches, having been given the largesse of the world.

My heart is suddenly in shock. That....that stone-faced, handsome man....isn't that Xiao Huo? Even though his attire and demeanor is vastly different from back in the desert, I'm sure that I didn't make a mistake. The other young men are all happily chatting on their horses, while his lips are tightly closed and his eyes stare into the distance. It's clear that while he's physically here, his heart isn't here.

Hong Gu notices my expression and worriedly asks what's wrong. I point to Xiao Huo "Who is that?"

She smiles at me "Yu Er, you sure don't have ordinary taste (in men). All these young men are high born, but he's the most extraordinary amongst them. Plus he still hasn't married yet, and hasn't gotten engaged."

I glare at her "Hong Gu, you entered the wrong profession, you ought to have been a matchmaker." She smiles and explains "His aunt is the current Empress, his uncle is the officially titled Great General, with a reputation that thunders through Xiong Nu and Xi Yu, with wealth to equal 8,000 homes. His name is Huo Qu Bing and he is Chang An's most famous young Lord. To others he's taciturn and rarely has any emotion, but supposedly he's got quite a temper and is exceedingly proud. He even dares to talk back to his uncle in public. But somehow the Emperor totally gets along with him, and cuts him

quite a lot of slack. This means not a single person in Chang An dares to piss him off.”

I stare at him on the horse and I can’t describe the feeling in my heart. In Chang An, when I was at my most down, I wanted to find him. But I didn’t find him. When I entered the Shi Estate and was walking through the long corridors, I thought the person on the other side would be him, but it wasn’t. Just when I was least expecting it, he appeared. I already suspected he was not someone common, but I never could have imagined that he would be the nephew to both the current Han Emperor and the Great General’.

He seemed to sense something and turned in my direction, so I quickly released the blinds in the carriage. Hong Gu just smiled at me and didn’t press on. But later she quietly said “Don’t underestimate yourself. You are young, and are so pretty, if you have the heart, there is nothing you can’t get in Chang An. Take the current Empress Wei, she wasn’t born much higher in status than we were. Her mom was a maid serving the princess, and had her out of wedlock. She didn’t have a father, and when she grew up became a dancing girl in the household of the princess. Based on her extraordinary looks, she landed the Emperor and become the Mother to the Han people. Take also the Great General Wei. He was also a bastard born, with a hungry childhood. He only earned this position by conquering the Xiong Nu.”

I cuddle next to her, assuring her that I was just thinking through some things, though I understand her point. I give her a proverb that causes her to stop and think, wishing she understood this concept when she was young and didn’t have to end up here. Even though Hong Gu is pretty, she is past her prime. The scenery outside is pretty but we are both not fully appreciating it. The trip ends and I return to the Shi Estate.

I walk into the Bamboo Residence to find Jiu Ye reading alone under the flickering oil light. Seeing this, my eyes suddenly feel teary, remembering how Papa would wait for me late into the night, for me to return after a crazy day of playing outside. He would read a book and sit there to wait for me. One lamp, one person, and that was what warmth was.

I stood at the door in silence, letting the warmth of the room flow into my heart. My heart, which had been uncomfortable all afternoon, gradually became at ease. He sensed me and smiled to welcome me back. I told him I went to visit Hong Gu and then we took a short day trip out.

He gently asks if I’ve eaten and I confirm Hong Gu brought snacks and I ate along the way. I ask him directly why he lets the dancing houses owned by the Shi Enterprises compete with each other rather than letting them collaborate. People will think he has no ability to manage. Jiu Ye responds that he doesn’t have the ability to manage. I think for a moment and ask him “Didn’t you tell me to do what I wanted? I want to keep learning at the dancing house. Whether as a maid or keep the accounts.” He smiles and agrees. I bow and thank him.

He turns his wheelchair and then hands me a package “Returning this to its rightful owner.”

The package contains the Luo Lan outfit. As my hand grazes over it, I don’t know what to say. This is not something a simple thank you can convey.

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 1 - Chapter

4

Chapter 4: Beauty

When the carriage returns to Luo Yu House, my position has greatly changed. I am returning as the new head of this business. I was assured Hong Gu would be fine with it, and indeed she was, pleased that she was not punished and could still enjoy her life and run the house with me. She handed me the books for the last few years, and confirmed that the best girls have indeed left. In truth, she was happy I came, someone to bear the heavy burden with her. And with my friendship with the Big Boss, I would be a good mountain for her to lean on.

I understood now why Wu Ye allowed me to be the new head, hoping I can turn the fortunes of this dance hall around not because I have the capability, but because I had the connections with Jiu Ye. I was told that Fang Ru has the potential but she didn't have the heart to do this. I called for her to be brought to me. I told Hong Gu not to worry, these things take time. We can train the girls, but it's luck to find a true star with talent and beauty. We might want to build up our reputation outside first with fresh new tactics, and then the talent will come to us.

I told her it was up to the two of us to think up new ideas, suggesting we take a tour of all the dance houses and she tell me what their specialties are. When Fang Ru arrived, I told her that I was giving her back her sale contract and she was free to leave. She looked shocked and grateful. I told her to come to me if she needed anything since I saw her as a friend. She ran off so quickly Hong Gu remarked that she's never seen Fang Ru move that fast in this house before. I tell her there is a chance Fang Ru may return of her own accord, and we need to take it because forcing her to stay she will never put her heart in it.

I've paid off Fang Ru's debt and the money will be docked from my earnings, which makes me laugh, to incur debt on this job before I even take on any responsibility. Hong Gu doesn't know if I'm hurting in my wallet right now, but she knows I'll be hurting elsewhere soon. She stares my ears until I back away. Hong Gu says "It's not my fault. You got out but then you chose to come back willingly. From now on you will be the face of this business, you have to look the part."

I remember legends of the past who have sacrificed, whereas I am merely sacrificing my ears. When I return to the Bamboo Residence, I peek in the mirror and realize how ugly I look right now. I touch my ears and sigh. Papa didn't want me to become a flower, yet I become the head of a bunch of flowers. But if what I am doing can alleviate some of the worry in Jiu Ye's furrowed brows, then everything will be worth it. If back then I had this

level of thoughtfulness, perhaps I could have helped Papa think up great plans, then things would not have.....

I shake my head and tell the me in the mirror “Don’t chase after the dead. You already spent more than a thousand days in sadness, it’s time to forget and look ahead. Didn’t Papa say so? The mistakes of the past are so that we don’t make it again. You’ve grown up now, it’s time for you to learn to share in another person’s worries.”

I can smell Xiao Feng bringing dinner, which normally would send me running, but today I don’t move from my spot. I tell him to bring the food inside, I don’t feel well. Xiao Feng worries that I’m sick and has Jiu Ye come check on me. It was Jiu Ye who treated his sick grandpa. I quickly said it was nothing, startled to learn that Jiu Ye knew medicine.

After dinner, I kept thinking about how to run the business when there was a knock on the door and I absentmindedly said to come in. It was Jiu Ye, and I wanted to wrap a towel around my head but couldn’t find one, so I just covered my ears. I pulled on the string by accident and it hurt like heck. He asked if I was sick, and then saw my ears “Hong Gu pierced your ears?”

I pouted and nodded. He laughed “Take your hand away, didn’t Hong Gu tell you not to touch it for 10 to 20 days otherwise it will get infected?”

I realized that if it was infected, the string would be removed and after the infection heals, I’ll be pierced again. I quickly put my hands down. Jiu Ye looked at my weepy expression and shook his head with a smile. He turned his wheelchair around and left, returning shortly with a small ceramic pot. He explained that this was aged wine that was good for preventing infections.

He gestured with a white cloth for me to tilt my head so I knelt down and turned my head towards him. His cold hands lightly touched my ear lobes and barely grazed my cheeks, but I felt my face heat up. He used his hand to hold my head still and when I turned, my lips accidentally pressed against his palm. My heart thumped and I quickly shifted my head, staring intently at my skirt hem on the ground. His hand stilled for a moment before it resumed cleaning my ears.

As he wiped my ears with the wine, he revealed that he had his ears pierced as a child. Since he was a sickly child, his mom heard that piercing the ear to pretend to raise the boy as a girl will make the child easier to raise healthy.

To create the earring hole, Hong Gu strung some ugly moles on the ends of the string. I asked if he had those when he got his ears pierced. He teased me “My mom had mine painted in rainbow colors to make me happy.” I looked at him with some pity, clearly his were even more conspicuous than mine.

After he wheeled himself out, I remained kneeling on the pallet for quite some time. Suddenly I stood up and started dancing and twirling on the pallet. Until my body grew tired and I collapsed on my covers, where I buried my head in the blanket and smiled like a loony. When wolves are young, they learn to lick their own wounds. So this is what it feels like to be taken care of by someone else. It is so warm, and I want to be a human. Papa Papa, I am so happy right now!

Buried in the blankets, I had my goofy smile for a long time. Suddenly I sat up and

grabbed a hankerchief and wrote along the edges of it.

“Happiness is the flower that grows in the heart. Beautiful and seductive, lingering and enchanting a person. But the memory can lie, and I worry that one day I won’t remember today’s happiness. So I want to write down what happens from now on. So that one day when I am old, so old that I can’t even walk, I can sit on a pallet and read these hankerchiefs and see my own happiness. There will be times of sadness, but no matter if it’s happy or sad, it’s the traces of the life I led. But I will try my hardest to be happy.....”

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While dining at Yi Ping Ju, the top restaurant in the city, we heard a beggar singing a folk tale song outside. The performance was so well received the beggar was greatly rewarded by those who listened. It gave us the idea to add a story to our dances, which had until now been just a performance without any narrative. After a month, I came up with an interesting story, with songs and lyrics to accompany it.

Hong Gu was worried, a story about a princess and her horse servant falling in love and overcoming all odds to be married. I thought it was romantic. Hong Gu pointed out that even an idiot would see that, despite all the names being changed, it was the story about the current Han princess, Princess Pingyang, and her husband the Great General Wei (who was formerly her horse servant). That was exactly what I intended.

Hong Gu asked “You want to use the whispered about story that everyone in Chang An has heard about, the story about the current Great General Wei, to incite everyone’s curiosity and bring in the audience who wants to hear gossip. But one person is the current General holding all the military might in the Kingdom, and the other is the older sister to the current Han Emperor. Have you thought about their reaction?”

I popped a sweet in my mouth and responded “What kind of reaction? Great General Wei was base-born and endured a lot of hardships in his youth, which is why he understands the struggles of the common people, and why he has such a gentle persona. He is someone who will not create unnecessary scenes. If he hears of this, he will likely laugh it off and ignore us. Princess Pingyang is always worried about the age gap between her and General Wei. On the surface she pretends not to care, but she really does care what others think. Her biggest worry is that General Wei married her because of her birth, but deep down he dislikes that she’s much older than him. But this dance performance will highlight their love story, how they fell in love despite their great differences and only could be together after the Emperor discovered it and used a decree to allow them to get married. What a fabulous happy ending!”

Hong Gu asked about the Emperor, leaving me laughing at how impressed she must be with my prowess, that the performance I devised could potentially reach the ears of the Emperor. If that happened, it would mean we really were famous. Hong Gu knows this industry, if we perform it, we’ll be famous.

I explain that I tried my best to paint the Emperor in the best light, as wise and brave. How he receives it is beyond my control. But I want to take this chance and asks her to take it with me. She sighed, impressed with my youth and guts. She’s endured not being famous for so long, she wants to take this leap of faith with me, especially since I’ve put so much

thought into it.

Fang Ru suddenly returns, softly telling us that she wants to return to the dancing house. She appears resigned, but then loses her temper at me, asking if I'm happy now that she's returned. Isn't this what I wanted all along? I tell her to stop blaming the others and the world for what happened to her. She starts to cry and let out her frustrations, while Hong Gu comforts her. I tell her "When Hong Gu was six, she was sold by her brother so he could marry a woman. I don't even know who my parents are. All the girls here have sob stories. At least you had good parents for many years. I've already torn up your sales contract so you are coming back as a free woman. You can leave anytime. But if you choose to stay, you have to follow the rules of this house."

After Fang Ru goes to rest, I ask Hong Gu how it feels to play a good guy for once. She concedes it feels good, and she has seen that my methods produce better results than forcing girls to do what they hate. I have Fang Ru start learning the part of the princess, with two other girls to learn the part of the Great General Wei. I tell Hong Gu to adjust the performance as necessary and I'll leave it up to her, since I'm going home now. I suddenly realize that I used the word "home", not sure when that started. Hong Gu laughs, asking me to just move here to make it more efficient and more fun to spend time together. I make a move at her without responding, getting in the carriage and heading off.

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I noticed through the window that it was another full moon night, surprising me to realize it. Brother Wolf is likely strolling under the moonlight, and occasionally howling at the moon. Does he think of me? I don't know if wolves have this emotion. I'll ask him when I go back to see him. Or perhaps he has a mate now, someone to howl at the moon with.

Chang An and Xi Yu are vastly different. Looking skyward, there is bound to be an obstruction like a rooftop or a wall. In the desert plains, everywhere you look the sky connects with the edges of the earth. But right now I am sitting on the roof and looking at the sky, and it looks as expansive.

I touch the flute in my hand. Being busy choreographing the performance, I haven't touched it in a long time. I don't know if I can play the Bai To Ying tune I just learned. I play with a series of stops and starts, filled with mistakes. But I'm still happy. Not being able to howl at the moon, playing at the moon is also an enjoyment. After playing it another time, it's much smoother and I feel quite proud of myself.

As I'm being all full of myself towards the moon, the sound of another flute wafts up to me. It's leisurely and elegant, like a fairy dancing or a beauty weeping. Jiu Ye sits in the courtyard playing a flute. The same flute, mine sounds like a hungry 80 year old while his sounds like a fair maiden at the banks of a river. His music seems to be pulling at the moonlight, illuminating him with a silvery essence so that his white robe makes him appear indescribably handsome.

The song ends yet I remain bathed in the conflicting emotion of happiness turned to woe [that her tune was so bad compare to Jiu Ye]. He held his flute and looked up at me "Bai To Ying is a song about a woman's despair. If your heart isn't aligned, it's impossible to capture all the tonal shifts. This is my first time hearing this tune played with such a happy vibe. Thankfully you have an expansive lung to play it."

I stuck my tongue out at him “This is the only tune I know, so tomorrow I’ll go learn more. Your playing is so wonderful to listen to. Keep playing, I’m in such a happy playing mood.” I pointed to the moon “The bright moon, the clear sky, the swaying bamboo trees next to you, these are all such happy things.” Sometimes people are not as well off as wolves. Wolves always get excited at the full moon, whereas people often ignore it.

Jiu Ye looked at me for a moment before nodding “You are right, these are all happy things.” He looked at the moon again before raising his flute to his lips. I don’t know this tune, but it sounds like a spring rain where people are laughing, the trees are laughing, the blades of grass are laughing. I stare at Jiu Ye playing the flute. I don’t know why you have this hidden sorrow in your eyes, but I want to ease it.

Under the black and blue night sky, with the moon hovering over us, one of us sits in the courtyard, the other sits on the roof with knees drawn up, the bamboos as dancer and the jade flute as music.

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Fang Ru’s quiet and restrained performance as the princess sending her general off to war is heartbreaking, so the people in the audience sniffle and wipe their tears away. Hong Gu is shocked at how well Fang Ru is doing after a slightly shaky start. She thinks in 10 days, Luo Yu House will be the hottest place in all of Chang An. I smile and walk outside.

It’s April already, the air bursting with energy. All the excitement I kept pent up in front of Hong Gu finally bubbles forth. What is waiting for me in the future? Will I achieve the objective I hid within the dance performance? I hear a noise and walk to the courtyard to see the music conductor pushing a man out. He explains this man wants a job as a musician here but we already have enough.

The young man is wearing worn but clean robes, a clear open face that looks honest but slightly worried. I got a good impression from him so ask where he’s from. He’s just arrived at Chang An, and his name is Li Yan Nian. I allow him to play for me, and he’s come prepared with his lute carried on his back. He starts to play and his music is extraordinary, transporting the audience to the vast wilderness where nature and music blend seamlessly together.

I know I must keep this talent no matter what. I ask why he’s seeking employment here. With his talent, the more famous Tian Xian House ought to be his first choice. He admits that he went there already and they want him. He explains that he’s lost his parents recently and traveled here with his younger brother and sister to seek a living. His sister heard about the new dance performance of “Hua Yue Nong” (Flower Moon Passion) here at Luo Yu House and insisted he come here to play for us.

Li Yan Nian explained that his sister thinks the performance of Hua Yue Nong was surely well calculated. I was stunned to know that his sister saw through my intentions and could see that this was no simple dance performance. Since I was small, I learned tactic and strategy, with Papa teaching me that life can change on a dime. Having once experienced a cataclysmic event, after entering the Shi Residence, I started collecting data on the rich and powerful in Chang An. But this sister of his appeared to have just arrived in Chang An and already knows the workings of it. Her decision to eschew a more famous dance house for ours is a decision made with purposeful forethought and the willingness to take a risk.

If she knew my ulterior motive and therefore wants to enter Luo Yu House, what is her motive? Why does she want to meet Princess Pingyang?

I take a closer look at Li Yan Nian, finding him quite handsome. If his sister is equally as eye-catching, then I must keep this person. I doubled the offer he got from Tian Xian House. He accepted calmly, not seeming particularly happy. I tell him to call me Madam Yu, like everyone here does. I decide to call him Master Li, and invite him to move into the house with his siblings. He confirms that they are living in a shack in the outskirts of the city, and I share that I once lived in the forest when I first arrived, which finally elicits a smile of mutual understanding from him.

I ordered a room cleaned and inform Hong Gu I hired a new musician, telling her to trust me on this one, his talent is unparallel. Li Yan Nian arrives the next morning with his siblings. His younger brother resembles him, with a bit more youthful brashness. His sister is covered in a face veil, but even her walk is elegant like a dance, entrancing us all.

Under the veil, all I can see are her eyes, which are enough to assess her. It's seductive yet calculating, in a split second it felt like a flash of a sword slashed through the air. I'm intrigued! I smile, while besides me Hong Gu keeps sighing and sighing. This girl, just by her form, has caused Hong Gu who has seen countless beauties, to be speechless. Li Yan Nian bows to me and introduces his younger brother Li Guan Li and his sister Li Yan. [The Yan character in the names of Li Yan Nian and Li Yan are completely different characters in Chinese though pronounced the same.]

Li Guan Li happily checked out their residence, while Li Yan didn't enter the room but stood in place and looked at me. The first words she said to me was wondering why I did all this for them. She didn't think their status deserved my benefaction. Her voice was not like that of most girls. It was deep and low, requiring one to listen carefully to capture her words. It was akin to someone whispering in your ear at night, causing a twitching in the heart.

I told her "I normally don't like to be so obvious, but I really want to keep you. And it's all of you, not just Master Li. I like to do things in one clean swoop, so you don't have to move around, which is more hassle for all of us."

She asked "Us?" I laughed "Your brother is a master at the lute and handsome to boot. His sister understood my intentions simply by watching the dance performance I created. How can I let my kindred spirit be disappointed?"

Li Yan's eyes reveal twinkling mirth "Madam is surely very perceptive."

I didn't know there could be a female version of bosom buddies, where two people just get each other. I chuckled "No more than you. My name is Jin Yu."

She elegantly takes off her veil "I am Li Yan."

I suck in a deep breath as I am hit by stunning shock. It's not like I haven't seen a beautiful woman before, but she is not someone that the word beautiful is even adequate to describe. So it's true that in this world, there is a kind of beauty that can make a person forget oneself. If the stars fell because of her, if the moon lost its lustre because of her, I would not be surprised.

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 1 - Chapter 5

Chapter 5: Shadow in the Window

On the 6th day of performing “Hua Yue Nong”, the prices have tripled and all the seats are sold out for days already. I’m paying the girls not only their wages, but also extra depending on their character performance on stage. Everyone is happy, even Fang Ru, who has rocketed to fame and can vie with the top dancers in the city on her fees for spending time with a customer [just chatting and drinking in a private box, not anything salacious].

The performance hall has a common area seating below, but also private boxes up top where the ladies or more high class clients can watch the performance in privacy. I bring the Li siblings to one private box. They protest such kindness but I tell them this is my box which I never rent out so they can use it. Li Yan gives me a look, wondering who I am keeping this room for? I smile at her, telling her to guess.

A maid comes running in and tells me Hong Gu desperately needs me because some very important guests have arrived. I stand up but then sit down to calm myself. Li Yan asks “Is the person you are waiting for finally arrived?” I nod “Most likely? Hong Gu grew up here and knows everyone. She won’t need me unless it’s urgent.” She asks if I need this room but I tell her there are other empty rooms. I sip my tea and fix my skirt before heading out, having calmed myself.

Outside I see Hong Gu leading two men down the hallway. She sees me and her face immediately relaxes. Xiao Huo, no, Huo Qu Bing, hair finely combed and adorned, with elegant and lavish attire, wearing a somber expression, is right there. The moment he sees me, his footsteps stop. I have a small smile on my face as I walk up to courtesy to him. “Young master Huo has deigned to visit our Luo Yu House, what an honor it is.”

He looks at me for a few moments, and then his face lit up and he smiles “You really came to Chang An!” Hong Gu looked at me and then looked at Huo Qu Bing, her face registering her confusion. I initially want to mess with him a bit, but when he smiled so openly and didn’t seem to feel bad at all, I got a bit annoyed. I shifted and gestured for him to keep going.

Suddenly another maid comes running to tell me tha Wu Ye is here, with someone he calls Third Master Shi, and there is also someone else in the back of the carriage. I let out an “Ah!”, pulling my skirt up and taking off. I suddenly remember and quickly run back to Huo Qu Bing and gave him a bow “I have an urgent matter to handle, will the young master please excuse me.” I tell Hong Gu to bring him to his room before running outside.

Jiu Ye is pushing his wheelchair with Wu Ye, Tian Cao, Shi Feng following behind him. My happy voice arrives first “Why didn’t you send someone ahead to tell me?” He laughs “It was a last minute decision to come see what has been keeping you so busy that you didn’t even come home last night.”

I wrinkle my nose and laugh, walking beside him “I wasn’t busy last night, I was admiring a beauty. Later I’ll let you meet the beauty.” He smiles and doesn’t respond.

At the end of the hallway, I tell the others to climb the stairs. They don’t move until Jiu Ye tells them to go. I take Jiu Ye into a very small room, the size of a large box really, fitting only me and Jiu Ye inside. I can’t even fully straighten my body, needing to crouch down next to Jiu Ye. I apologize “Because of safety reasons, it couldn’t be built any bigger.” The door is closed and I pull a bell. Soon the room starts to lift. Jiu Ye quietly asks ” Did you build this on purpose?” I nod a yes.

In the darkness it’s extremely quiet, so quiet it’s like we can hear our thumping heartbeats. The candle is within reach but I don’t move to light it. Jiu Ye doesn’t mention it either. We just stay in this cramped space in silence. The light fresh scent from his body slowly drifts over to me, and his scent seems to enter my heart.

When we arrive, the performance has started. I make tea for Jiu Ye while Wu Ye urges me to go back and find Hong Gu, who is left with a mess to handle. Jiu Ye also tells me to go do my job.

When Hong Gu sees me, she shoves the tea set at me “I can’t stand it anymore! Young master Huo’s face can freeze a person. Since he stepped inside, I feel like it’s Winter descended again. I tried to be pleasant, saying a million things, but he doesn’t even raise an eyebrow. I’m frightened out of my wits, wondering if our performance, having not offended the Great General, has instead enraged the city’s most arrogant young lord. But when you show up, he starts to smile. I don’t know what’s going on between you two but I’m not going to be a part of it anymore. I’m afraid I’ll lose my life.”

I ask her to stay but she tells me to handle it as the head of the house. I sigh and take the tea set, walking slowly to the room. The servant opens the door for me and I walk in. The young master Huo who supposedly has the power to change the weather in this city is watching the performance with a poker face. I put the tea set down and place a cup before him. He doesn’t look at me so I also don’t feel like speaking. I turn to watch the show. He picks up the cup and takes a sip, which is when the performance arrives at the scene when the dancer Qiu Xiang appears while dressed as the Great General. She takes a fake sword and dances around the stage, raging at the Xiong Nu.

Huo Qu Bing spits out his tea and bends down, with one hand on the table and the other on the tea set, his body rocking gently. I hurry before him and take his cup and put it on the table, moving to wipe the table dry. He tempers down his laughter and points at Qiu Xiang on the stage. “If the Great General Wei looked like that, clearly it would be the Xiong Nu who kill him, rather than him killing the Xiong Nu.”

I recall the fierceness of the Xiong Nu and I also force myself not to laugh. I get up to go back to my seat when he grabs me. I look at him and he says “This performance, other than the one playing the princess, doesn’t have anything worth watching. Sit down and talk with me. I have something to ask you.”

“Yes, young master Huo.”

“Xiao Yu, I couldn’t tell you who I was back then, but you can still call me Xiao Huo”, he said with a touch of exasperation.

“You believe I’m a Han person now?”

“I don’t know, your appearance was inexplicably mysterious, you knew the Xi Yu territory intimately. You call yourself a Han, but you are not familiar with the Han world. If we weren’t on guard, would that be normal of us? After traveling with you a bit, I knew you had no ill intentions. But I was disguised on that trip to Xi Yu, so I still couldn’t tell you my real identity.” I keep my head lowered, knowing that what he said is true.

He softly asked “Xiao Yu, can you accept my explanation?”

I raise my head to look at him “I know the Xi Yu territory because I was raised in the wolf pack. We have the ability not to get lost in the desert. I never lived in Han territory which is why it’s foreign. I call myself a Han because I see myself as a Han here” and I point to my heart. “But maybe I don’t resemble anybody, and I belong in the wolf pack. This is all I can say for now. Can you believe me?”

He stared into my eyes and nodded his head “I believe. As for the rest, perhaps you’ll tell me one day.”

Only trusting someone will a person stare directly into the eyes, and Huo Qu Bing is that kind of person. After our eyes meet, I quickly turn away. I don’t want to probe into his thoughts, and don’t want him to probe into mine.

He asked “How long have you been in Chang An?” I replied “Half a year.”

He was silent and then asked “Since you deliberately prepared this performance, you must already know who I am. Why didn’t you come find me? What if I heard about the performance but still didn’t come?”

So he misunderstood that this performance was for him. He’s so self-absorbed and I smile mockingly at him “When I wanted to find you, I didn’t know where. And when I knew where you were, I thought it didn’t matter if I saw you again.”

He looked at me, and then his voice turned cold “What is the purpose of this performance?” His hands fisted suddenly “You want to enter the Palace? I thought you were an exotic desert bloom, but turns out you are yet another who wishes to become a Palace phoenix.” [Phoenix here means one of the Emperor’s concubines.]

I shake my head with a smile “No, I’m perfectly fine so why do I want to go to that godforsaken place?” His expression relaxed and he looked towards Fang Ru. I shake my head again “She’s innocent and just looking for a way to make a living. I doubt she’ll survive there.” He wondered “So it’s not this and it’s not that. What exactly are you thinking?”

I look at Fang Ru, playing the Princess, and confirm my target. He raises his eyebrows “Your idea is right on target then. The Princess has heard of “Hua Yue Nong” and asked me if I’ve been here and seen the person who choreographed the performance.”

He returns to watch the performance so we sit in silence. I move to excuse myself when he

says “In this performance, everything is calculated and each lyric is well thought out. Yet earlier you left me and rushed outside to welcome the Big Boss of the Shi Enterprises. Aren’t you worried about upsetting me?”

I knew I was rash back there but I don’t regret it. “He’s my Big Boss, there is no reason I shouldn’t go and welcome him” He shot me a glance “Really? My position doesn’t measure up to a boss?”

Hong Gu enters and apologizes profusely to Huo Qu Bing, explaining that the Big Boss is quite angry and berating Wu Ye. I need to run so I shoot an apologetic look at Huo Qu Bing “I have to go. I can see you’re not a petty person, so don’t make it difficult for me right now. I have to go accept my punishment, so my situation is pretty dire as is.”

He replied “No wonder the Princess was confused as to why the Shi Enterprises was doing things differently. You are a bold one, without getting the approval of your boss, you put on a performance about the Imperial family’s private life.” I don’t respond but merely stand up. He suddenly said “Do you want me to accompany you?”

I startle and feel a soft warmth inside. I shake my head. He sends me a lazy smile and says with some teasing “Don’t bend over backwards. If Shi Enterprises doesn’t want you, my estate will take you.” I shoot him a glance before walking out.

I tell Hong Gu not to be afraid, I’ll take full responsibility. Xiao Feng lets me through and humphs at me “You need to think about how to explain yourself to Jiu Ye. No wonder Master San teaches me that a woman is hard to keep around.” I rap him on the head and scowl at him “You little rascal, you better not get married someday then.”

When I enter, Wu Ye is kneeling on the ground while Jiu Ye doesn’t appear upset. I walk up and also kneel. Jiu Ye sends Wu Ye away to await his punishment. He bows and tearfully tries to explain that he was raised by the family and just wanted to raise the prosperity of the family business.

Jiu Ye looks at me “You really surprised me. If you have such cunning, this Luo Yu House isn’t good enough for you. Instead of running a business, you decide to pander to the Imperial family. What are you getting at?” Wu Ye tries to explain that I am young and just want to attract more customers, and it’s his fault for not restraining me. Jiu Ye huffs that the performance is calculated in each and every lyric. If I wanted to grow the business, any old narrative will do. I chose such a big risk clearly because I had a bigger purpose.

I concede “I am purposefully trying to attract the attention of Princess Yangping so I can make a connection with her.” I explain my guesses for why the Shi Enterprises have fallen in recent times. It rose to prominence with the Bao family gained the Imperial favor. But with the fall of the Bao family and the rise of the Wei family, the business went along with it. I just want to build ties with the Wei family, currently the reigning power in court, to build the business back up.

Jiu Ye looks at me “Ms Jin Yu. The Shi Enterprises employ thousands of people who don’t have your cunning and wits, nor your ambition. I can’t afford to take this risk with you. From now on, I’m selling Luo Yu House and it will no longer have any ties to the Shi Enterprises. How you want to run it is your business. Tian Cao, let’s return home.” He looks calm but distant, acting like he doesn’t care a whit.

I stare in disbelief but he doesn't give me another glance. Because we are kneeling in his path, he asked us politely to move aside with a voice as cold as ice, ice that can freeze a person's heart. I stand up and rush out. I suddenly remember that he needs to get downstairs but hates letting others assist him. I turn back to find someone to show Tian Cao and Shi Feng how to operate the lift.

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I'm reading the classics and thinking back to what Jiu Ye said to me. His words are true, but if I'm careful, there ought to be only positives to come of making ties with the Princess and the Wei family. Li Yan comes in with some wine, asking how long I plan to stay locked up inside. She wonders what I have in store for the Li siblings, they can't just stay here doing nothing. I decline the wine she offers, finding in it a temporary solace that I have no need of. Li Yan takes a drink, appreciating how the drink can take a person away from their real life for awhile.

I tell her "I don't know, originally I was intending to change the fortunes of the Shi Enterprises by getting the pieces ready, but then I discovered that no one wanted me to do so. It was all my unsolicited offering. Li Yan, did I do something wrong?"

Li Yan replies "Jin Yu, how can you say such stupid things. Life is a river and we are always fighting to go upstream and not get swept away. You can't even hope to maintain Luo Yu House with the competition out there."

I compliment her for being so observant despite being new here. She grabs my hand and asks to be candid with me. She knows my intention behind the performance and that is hers as well. She asks for my assistance. I tell her that even without my help, with her beauty and brains, she'll achieve whatever she sets out to do regardless. Li Yan looks down and takes a drink of wine, looking deep in thought and solemn. Her beauty is astounding but now it comes with a downcast aura.

Fang Ru comes to ask if it's true that we've been cut loose. Hong Gu enters and reveals that Shi Enterprises is planning to divest from all the dancing houses managed by Wu Ye, who is so distraught he's inconsolable. Anyone with money can buy the dancing houses, and supposedly the money will be used to start a herbal business. Hong Gu is thrilled, because this means one less overseer.

I look down and ask if they are sure they want to follow me. Who knows where I will lead them? Hong Gu is sure. If we get in trouble and it's off with our heads, mine is the first to go and they can all plead innocence or as accomplices. If we earn rewards and riches, I'm sure to share with them. She's decided to stick by me, especially since I'm not stupid and is clearly not looking for trouble. Fang Gu revealed that she rejected a customer's request to drink with him, but the man didn't dare get angry with her, knowing that all the Wei family officials have been by to watch Fang Ru perform and even praised her. All Fang Ru knows is that she can say "no" now to customers, and that is because of me. I tell everyone that we should keep going forward then, keep trying to make money.

Hong Gu reveals that we've made so much money since I took over that we have enough to buy Luo Yu House. I don't respond, and ask Li Yan to take a walk with me. Li Yan asks if I'm going over to the Shi Estate tonight? She finds it odd that the Big Boss doesn't want to operate a steady business like dancing houses, and instead wants to venture into herbal

medicines with lots of market pricing risk.

We walk by the lake where some girls are playing, breaking off branches from the willow tree to go make waves in the water. Li Yan looks momentarily displeased before excusing herself to go back. I ask the girls if the branches will grow if it's planted in the soil. They explain the planting season has passed for the willow tree. I suggest having a gardner try, and explaining that breaking off healthy branches to play with is a waste of its beauty. These girls grew up here and don't understand and appreciate the verdant beauty of nature.

I think about Papa, about Xi Yu, about the desert, sitting by the lake and looking out in a daze. I recall Li Yan being unhappy about the broken branches, but she doesn't appear to be someone who is maudlin about nature. Her background is a mystery, and then I suddenly have a clarity about who she might be. I let out an "Ah", and then there was also a shout from behind me. I turn around and Huo Qu Bing is behind me. I turn so quickly that I almost collided with his chest, so I jumped backwards. Then realized that the lake was right behind me, so I tried to turn again but couldn't find a spot.

Huo Qu Bing reached out to grab my hand, but since I jumped so far back, our hands barely touched each other before I fell into the lake. I learned how to swim from Brother Wolf, which is what might be termed the "wolfy paddle". It's the exact opposite of elegant, stylish, and beautiful. I swam towards the shore while Huo Qu Bing stood by the banks and laughed at me. He was laughing so hard he was clutching his belly and almost toppled over. "You really were raised by wolves. This stroke, this stroke, hahahahahaha, all you need to do is stick your tongue out....." The rest of what he was saying was drowned out by his laughter.

I was so mad that I paddled and stuck my tongue out at him like a wolf. I'll let him laugh himself to death. He let out a yelp and then covered his eyes, crouching on the ground with his head lowered, just laughing.

I reach the shore and he reached his hand out to help me up. Initially I wanted to ignore him, and then changed my mind and grabbed his hand. But then I took a deep breath and fell back into the water. Surprisingly he didn't resist, and his hand only tightened before his body followed mine into the water. Once I got my evil way, I wanted to let go of his hand, but instead he held on tight. Underneath the water, we stared at each other. His hair billowed out around his face, making his smile seem even more carefree.

I kick the water and head towards the surface. He holds my hand and swims up as well. As we reach the shore, he still hasn't let go of my hand. I use my free hand to pinch him but he grabs it, now holding on to both my hands. I decide to use that momentum and kick him down there. He notices my devilish look and looks down, letting go of my hands "Why are you so evil, woman! If you actually kicked the target, I'd be through with this world."

I hold on to the edge of the shore and heave myself out of the water. My clothes are plastered to me. I can hear him chuckling in the water. I rush back to the house without looking back. As I was changing clothes, I told the maid outside "Inform the entire house that if the young master Huo's servant asks for clean clothes, no one is allowed to give it to him. You can say this is my orders. All the male clothes are being washed, but we have plenty of female skirts. You can give him one or two of those." She quizzically agreed and

ran off. I brushed my hair in the copper mirror and started to smile. Daring to make fun of me in my territory, let's see who is the embarrassed one now.

At dinner time, Hong Gu asks me “Today the young master Huo entered the house with a frigid expression, didn’t even watch a single performance and promptly disappeared. His servant asked for clean clothing, but since you already gave the order, we were all torn. Afraid he’d get so pissed he would smash the house down. The entire Chang An city knows that upsetting the Great General Wei is no big deal, but pissing off the young master Huo, one ought to get ready to for a funeral.”

I smile and give Hong Gu some vegetables “So did you give or not?” She made a sad face “Didn’t give, but I almost died of fright. I don’t care how you two play around, but don’t get us random people involved. A woman can’t be frightened, we’ll age really fast.”

I muffled my laughter “So did you see the young master Huo?” She responded “No, later his servant ordered a carriage out back and told everyone to leave. Since he left....but.....but....” I asked “But what?”

She started laughing now “But....wherever the young master Huo walked is like that area has been rained on. The room he stayed in, the entire pallet is soaked through, and the seat cushion as well.” I tossed my chopstick and put my hand on the table, holding my stomach shaking in laughter.

The current Han Emperor is a devotee of Confucius, especially in the learnings about “etiquette.” So says “Morals stem from etiquette. Clothing is the basis”, one’s clothes becomes the most fundamental requirement of every citizen in Chang An. Since Huo Qu Bing is always perfectly dressed and groomed, looking dashing, this time he must be in a bind. If any of the rich and powerful in Chang An accidentally saw him, he would become the laughingstock of the court.

I recall his always fearless gaze, and then feel like it’s wrong of me to laugh. Would he care? No, he wouldn’t. He’s not a man who would be constrained by his clothing. He’ll avoid being seen, but if he is, he’ll just put on a poker face and act like he doesn’t see the other person. It’ll make the other person wonder if he’s dressed incorrectly himself, and that a “wet, damp look” is suddenly en vogue in Chang An. Or he’ll just laugh it off, letting the other person realize it’s just not a big deal.

.....

The wind whips through my ears, this is the first time I’ve run full speed since arriving in Chang An. I’m almost tempted to let out a long howl. Arriving at the Shi Estate, I loss a rope and climb over the walls. The second my feet touch the ground, two men are on me. I try not to hurt them but they are not weak, pinning me against the wall. I call out “Shi Buo, it’s Yu Er.”

He called off the guards and asked me why I didn’t use the perfectly good front door. I took off my face veil and pouted, but didn’t answer. He sighed, not understanding us youngsters. He told me to go find Jiu Ye, who is likely still awake. I tease that I came to see him, causing him to laugh, but he begs old age and needing sleep, taking off.

I take off towards the Bamboo Forest, where a flute is playing. The light is on in the residence and his shadow is inked on the windows, seemingly lonely and cold. I stand

outside and finish listening to him play. I'm right outside the window where his shadow is on the paper panes. I reach out my hand but then lower it, back and forth, until finally my fingers lightly brush his shadow face. This is your eyes, this is your eyebrows, this is your nose, this is....this is your lips. I lightly touch it and my heart flips. I quickly move aside and touch between his eyes. I can't see, but I know this area is filled with worry. Can I be the wind, and blow that worry away? You are his shadow, you must know what he's thinking about? Please tell me what worries him so? Tell me!

The window softly opens and his face appears before me. My hand is suspended in mid-air, but so close to his face. So close that I can almost feel his body heat, but in the end I still don't make contact. I have this indescribable feeling in my heart – happy or sad? I sheepishly smile at him and pull my hand back, putting it behind my back. He smiles "How long have you been here?" "I just arrived" I say.

He invites me in since it's foggy outside. I got inside and he puts his flute down on the table. I see the oil lamp flickering a warm light, taking out my silver hair piece and I tamp down the extra specks of popping oil to make the light calmer. I ask why he's using oil rather than wax, is he learning to be like commoners? He replies "There is a saying "Oil popping, Happy tidings arriving". My heart leaps but I pretend to be calm "So is it true or not?"

He lifts a corner of his lips but doesn't answer. "There is also a saying that the oil lamp can avoid ghosts, shining a blue light on the spirits to identify them. When the lamp turned blue is when I opened the window, and you were standing there. Did you feel anything next to you?" I laugh "I hear ghosts love handsome young man, sucking their yang essence dry. You ought to beware." His reply "So it's true that you aren't afraid of anything in this world. Is there anything you are afraid of then?" I almost say "You!" but I was afraid to, not wanting to ruin this teasing mood under the lamp.

I tease that Xiao Feng revealed he knew medicine, asking if his services can be used if anyone in my house got sick. He laughs that being a sick child he saw so many doctors he naturally learned their craft just by observing. I feel a bit sad to hear this and look at the window. If someone was looking at us from outside, they would see two reflections in the window, close together. He asks why I'm smiling and I say no reason, I just want to. I ask why he's smiling, and he answers the same thing.

We quietly sit next to each other. I take the flute and try to play a few bars of poor tune. He looks slightly odd and I realize that the flute is still damp from his playing. I feel a sense of happiness and put the flute back on the table. After some time, he tells me to go to sleep since it's late. I'm surprised he still wants to let me stay here, and he responds that that room has always been empty so keeping it for me is no big deal. Running my business simply means it's not convenient for me to stay here all the time.

I ask again why he doesn't want to run the dancing houses, and whether he would object to me buying the dancing houses he's giving up on? He doesn't care, as long as I can afford to buy it, once it's sold it will have no further ties with the Shi Enterprises. We will each run our own business. I angrily stare at him, the more he wants to clearly define the boundaries between us, the more I'm going to make it as complicated as possible. I ask him to lend me money. He agrees to lend me money enough to buy Luo Yu House, telling

me to be satisfied with just that.

He smiles “Yu Er, the waters of Chang An are deep, and I’m already forced to carry that bucket of rancid water. But you can live clean and free. So if you want to run a business, just be satisfied with running Luo Yu House.” I pout “It’s not that easy, if I don’t encroach on others, others will encroach on me. Will Tian Xiang House let Luo Yu House survive?” He promises that he’ll make Tian Xiang House leave me alone.

I realized that he could still help me. I tell him “Jiu Ye, I don’t want to be the silk growing on the tree. The silk can only survive because of the tree, which blocks all the wind and rain for the silk. But won’t the tree grow tired, or if the rain is too strong the tree needs some help too. The silk can only watch and do nothing. I don’t want to survive needing to rely on the tree. I also want to be the tree that can help the other trees nearby block the wind and the rain, then enjoying the sun together, admiring the beautiful rainbow that appears after a storm.”

When I finish, I wonder if what I just said was akin to saying I wanted to accompany him, causing my face to burn up. The look in his eyes is so conflicted and he keeps looking at me. My heart does flip flops and I lower my head. After a few moments he said “Yu Er, you do what your heart tells you to do.”

I raise my head in happiness and stare at him. He smiles “But I will only lend you the money to buy Luo Yu House. If you want to be a tree, you’ll have to use your own capability to battle with the rain and winds.” Since he won’t lend me all the money, I tell him I’ll find a way. He is looking forward to what I’ll do.

When I ask why he decided to enter the herbal medicine business, he tells me that since we’ve drawn our boundaries, from now on neither will inquire into the other’s business. My warm heart suddenly dropped a few degrees. I stare at him, wondering if I asked something wrong? He gives me a look of mild exasperation “Yu Er, you are not the same as me. What I’m doing is what is best for you, And what is best for those dancing houses.”

“What is different between us?” He doesn’t answer and tells me to go to sleep, he’s tired as well. He does look tired and I quickly get up “I’ll be going then.” He takes the lamp and puts on a new candle wick for me. I take it and bow to him, walking back to my room with the lamp in my hand.

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 1 - Chapter 6

Chapter 6: Tipsy

I wake up late so by the time I return to Luo Yu House the girls are practicing dance under the tutelage of Li Yan. Hong Gu mutters that if I didn't show up soon, she'd be reporting a missing person to the authorities. We watch the dance, with Li Yan occasionally offering pointers, but her every gesture is as arresting as ever. I discuss with Hong Gu how Li Yan's dance appears to incorporate a foreign flavor, like she's taken the passion of the Xi Yu dancers and fluidly added it to her movements. But her performance doesn't have the flirty seductiveness of those dances, managing to be captivating and feminine while she remains pure and seemingly untouchable.

Li Yan asks if I've gotten the gold card to go ahead. I don't answer her but turn to Hong Gu, asking her to collect data on all the dance houses that will be divested. I plan to buy four of them. We have enough money for two, and I will find a way to get the rest. Hong Gu rushes off to do my bidding. Li Yan smiles "Slowly and surely, with preparation and patience. You call me your kindred spirit, but now I don't think I even deserve that. As long as you want to, every single dancing house in Chang An will be under your control."

I laugh and murmur "I'm the one who ought to wipe away some sweat. The dancing houses in Chang An are likely not even within your sights."

Initially she thought my intention behind the performance was to enter the Palace, but now it's clear I just want to run a successful business. While girls in this industry want to one day leave, I appear to be just fine being in it. What are my intentions?

I respond "It's not as complicated as you think. I'm just someone without any ties, and no desire for power or wealth. Unless the power and wealth can make me happy, then gold and silver mountains mean less to me than a full moon in the desert. My actions are well calculated and I will do anything to achieve my goal, but the ultimate reason is that I want to make myself happy, and make the person I care about happy. If Chang An isn't fun anymore, perhaps one day I will grow tired and run back to Xi Yu."

Li Yan looks at me "You are someone without any constraints. Like an eagle in the sky. You ought be flying in a place like Xi Yu, Chang An is likely not suitable for you." I ask if she's been to Xi Yu, but she hasn't and has only heard her father describe it.

Suddenly Hong Gu comes running in to inform us that Princess Pinyyang's servant come by with word that the Princess is on her way. I get dragged out to change, wondering if I'm supposed to welcome her at the door with a kneel and a bow, chanting "long live your highness." I tell Li Yan to have Master Li prepare as well.

I am seated and everyone crowds around to primp me, which is akin to torture with the pulling and the tugging, then affixing a hair piece to add more volume. Hong Gu goes to ask all the guests to leave, telling them the Princess is coming. I stop her, telling her not to reveal the Princess is coming and just give everyone back their money. I don't want to start bandying about the Princess' name already.

My eyes start to cross at the sight of all the silk and jewels being placed on me, leading me to wonder if everything of value Hong Gu owns is on my body right now. I tell her to stop, but she makes me exchange my ear bobs for a jewel encrusted waterfall earring. She tells me that a woman's entire appearance is of value. I run away to wait for the Princess, not wanting to be tormented any more. Standing at the door, I anticipate meeting the woman responsible for the rise to prominence of the Wei family and the Emperor stripping Empress Chao of her title [The Emperor stripped his first wife Empress Chao of her Empress title to hand it over to his new love Wei Zhi Fu, making her Empress Wei. Wei Zhi Fu is the sister to the Great General Wei, who also happens to be the Princess Pingyang's husband. This makes Huo Qu Bing nephew to the Emperor, Empress, Princess, and Prince Consort.]

The Princess arrives, and her servants appear pleased to see how I'm dressed to welcome their highness. I escort the Princess in after she informs us that she is here to watch the performance. I ask if she wants to see the entire thing since it's quite long, and she asks us to put on the best scenes. Li Yan Nian arrives and bows simply and respectfully to the Princess.

Qiu Xiang and Fang Ru, under the accompaniment of Li Yan Nian's lute, enact scenes where the princess is sending her general off to war. His stirring music, plus the emotional performances of Fang Ru and Qiu Xiang on stage, cause the room to be silent and even the servants of the princess are red-rimmed. Before the song is even finished, suddenly the door opens and the Princess' servant says "Young master Huo requests an audience with the Princess." Before his words fall Huo Qu Bing is already walking boldly into the room.

The Princess laughs "You're still so impatient, if your uncle (Great General Wei) saw you right now, he will surely lecture you." Huo Qu Bing bows to the Princess and goes to sit beside her "He says what he wants, I do what I want. If I get annoyed, then I'll just avoid him."

"Avoid him? How long has it been since you've paid your respects to your uncle? I recall you coming by around New Year's to greet us, but since then you show up only when your uncle isn't around. It's almost been half a year, and we're all a family, you....."

Huo Qu Bing hurriedly says "My dear Princess Auntie, can you please just let your dear nephew off the hook this time. When I enter the Palace, I get lectured to by Empress Wei, so why is even my kind Princess Auntie lecturing me now as well. Maybe in the future I won't visit the Princess' Estate anymore."

The Princess shook her head at him and resumed watching the performance. Immediately Huo Qu Bing's expression turned from the warm Spring to the dead of Winter and he turned to stare at me, checking me out from top to bottom with his icy eyes. Finally he pinned my eyes to his. I pretended not to notice. He kept staring at me only until the performance finished and Fang Ru, Qiu Xiang, and Li Yan Nian arrive to kneel before the

Princess.

The Princess compliments them on a great performance, but she does not want this performance to ever be put on again. Everyone's color disappears from their faces, and I hurry to kneel before the Princess, ready to accept her orders. She smiles, knowing this performance was so well thought out, and I was quite brave.

Huo Qu Bing stands up and walks over to me, kneeling down right next to me and cutting off what the Princess was saying "Qu Bing needs to beg forgiveness from the Princess." Even though he said beg forgiveness, but his face has an expression of not a care. The Princess smiles in shock "What did you do wrong? You guys go check if the sun will be setting in the East today" as she gestures to her servants.

"This is a long story, and it starts when Qu Bing first met this Ms Jin....." As Huo Qu Bing talked, his hands grabbed mine from underneath our robes.

The Han dynasty attire style mandates wide and large sleeves. Kneeling down next to each other, our sleeves overlapped, which allowed him now to do this without detection, When I realized what he was doing, he already reached my fingers. I immediately used my middle finger to poke his nerve. He was smiling and talking to the Princess, but his reaction was immediate and he avoided my middle finger and managed to grab my entire hand until it was in his grasp.

He seemed pleased and shot me a sideways glance. He gave my hand a squeeze and I raised my head to look at the Princess. She was listening to a very nervous part of the story and staring intently at Huo Qu Bing. It was like she was being pursued by the desert thieves, her life in the balance.

I relaxed my strength and my hand softened in his grasp. His words slightly slowed down and he gave me a head lowered questioning look. I kept my head lowered and didn't move. Slowly I used my strength to use my nail to poke the center of his palm. Thanks to Hong Gu, three of my nails are in the style of long and alluring. He wrinkled his brow. I let out a tiny smile. Let's see how long you can endure this.

".....so we were lost in the desert with not enough supplies, so we were doomed.....AY YA!" He suddenly yelped. Because the Princess was listening so intently, his sudden yelp caused her to almost jump out of her seat. I was also startled that my hand shook and I quickly looked at the Princess, afraid to use anymore strength.

The Princess worriedly asked "What happened?" Huo Qu Bing continued to hold my hand tightly without releasing it "It felt like an evil hard-hearted scorpion bit me." The Princess wanted to get up and I quickly explained this room was thoroughly cleaned for her arrival and there was no possibility of any animal being inside.

The Princess looked scared and disbelieving, so I shot Huo Qu Bing a look, asking him to smooth this over, and gave him a tiny pinch on the hand. Huo Qu Bing laughed "Oh, it appears that I accidentally poked myself." The Princess relaxed and said "You're so touchy feeling, not sure who you resemble. So what happened next?"

He continued to tell the story, but I was a bellyful of anger. I wanted to do it again, but the second my nails moved, he yelled out "Deadly snake!" I quickly retracted my nails. The Princess quizzically asked "What?" He said in all seriousness "In the desert there are

deadly snakes, deadly ants, deadly bees, all of which like to bite people. But if you yell out they won't dare to bite anymore." She looked confused but nodded her head. He continued his story and I decided to give up. In this situation I ought to let him win and do what he wants. He relaxed his grip on me and was just lightly holding my hand.

When he finished, the Princess asked me "So you are saying that she choreographed this performance just to get your attention?" He replied "Indeed so" and then shot me a look with was filled with warning and intensity. His hand also tightened on mine. It truly hurt and I quickly replied "Your humble citizen, I was too daring and bold, will the Princess please punish me." His eyes grew gentle and his grasp relaxed. He asked the Princess "Everything happened because of Qu Bing, so will Princes Auntie please forgive Qu Bing this once."

The Princess looked at him, and then looked at me, and then she smiled. "Fine, get up now! I never intended to berate Jin Yu, and I can't control what's going on between you two. You didn't have to busy yourself doing this, though I did enjoy hearing the story. And this is the first time I've heard of a human living with wolves."

Huo Qu Bing looked confident as he explained to the Princess that there are lots of stories in the recorded annals of humans communicating with animals. The Princess laughed "Oh yes, your uncle's trusty war horse appears to understand your uncle. When your uncle has time he even personally washes the horse down and talks to it like an old friend. Your uncle seems to spend more time with it than with me."

I tried pulling my hand back, and this time he didn't resist, only giving me a small squeeze before letting go. I bow in gratitude to the Princess and he also gets up and gives her a bow. He sits down next to the Princess again and she looks at him "Last year you said you were going hunting in the mountains, when in truth you went to Xi Yu. If your uncle found out, what'll happen?"

Huo Qu Bing huffed "The Emperor approved, so who dares berate me?" The Princess gets up and turns to me "I'm done watching the performance, and listening to the story, I'm ready to return now." After I send the Princess off and turn back, Huo Qu Bing looks at me but I ignore him and walk off. He chases after me and we return to the same room where I entertained the Princess. I sit where the Princess sat and don't say a word. He sits down next to me in silence as well. Suddenly he lays down and puts one leg on the seat "How does it feel?"

"A little tired, every word must be carefully thought through before saying it. But I also can't respond too slowly. And all the kneeling is making my knees ache."

He smiled "And yet you still dressed up like this? Thank goodness I heard about the Princess coming and rushed over here. Or else you might get scared half to death."

I tell him that he's over thinking this matter. He suddenly sat up and gave me a cold smile "I'm over thinking? When the Princess presents you (as a present) to the Emperor, that is the path where there is no return." I smile back "What if there is something better" He startles "Who? There is a girl in this dancing house that hasn't shown her face yet?"

I thank him for what he did today, asking if he would berate me if someone from my dancing house entered the Palace. He smiled lightly "My Aunt (Empress Wei) is an

already wilted flower in the eyes of the Emperor. She's already selecting ladies for his court, as is everyone in the Palace. If it's not you, someone else is thinking the same thing. The Princess is also looking for possibilities. When the Emperor visits the Princess, she always summons the most beautiful dancers. Some have caught his eyes, but after a few times serving the Emperor have been tossed aside and forgotten. There is a song about women who aspire to be Wei Zhi Fu (the name of Empress Wei). But how many women out there are actually as beautiful as Wei Zhi Fu was in her prime."

I respond "There is definitely not many women who have the Great General Wei as a brother and you as a nephew, that's for sure." He laughed and raised his palms "Don't count me in there. In General Wei's eyes, I'm just a giant block of wood that takes too long to mold. I'm sure he'd rather disown me if he could."

I smile at him "Are you one?" He asks "Do you think I am?" I didn't answer and instead ask why he told the Princess about my wolf background, what if I'm treated as a freak and locked away? He explains that was he the only one who saw me with Brother Wolf, he would have kept it a secret. But there were others with him that day, and the Emperor already knows, so it's best to come clean now with the Princess. I nod.

He orders me "Feed me some fruit." I put the plate in front of him "You feed yourself! I'm not one of the maids in your estate." He laughs and grab my hand "If my estate had one like you, why would I come here to experience your temper." I push his hand away "There is no one here right now, do you want to test your skills against mine?" He sighs and lays back down "You sure know how to ruin the mood."

I huff "Is this how you are in your own estate, flirting with the maids?" He smiles at me "Why don't you come back to my estate with me and spend a few nights, then you'll know." I humph at him and don't spar with him any further.

He asks me to bring that beauty over to check her out, whether she's worth our time. "Our?" I say with a raised brow. "Why not?" he responds. I tell him that I think this is best done through the Princess. He laughs and agrees, plus he has no interest in helping find a new ladylove for the Emperor.

He explains "I just like saying "our" and "us".....us, us, us....not you or I, but us, us....." I tell him to stop it. He ignores me and keeps saying "Us, us....." until I grab a fruit and shove it in his mouth. He doesn't get angry and instead smiled at me and started chewing.

I stand up "Who has time to waste with you, I've got other things to take care of." He also gets up "I'm off as well." I smile at him "Don't want to come with me to see the beauty?" He jokingly asks "Do you see me as someone enamored by feminine charm?" I stop for a moment, and then shake my head.

With a smirk, he leaves me with this "If I want to become powerful, why should I do these tactics. It's not that I don't understand, it's that I don't want to bother. If you think it's fun then go ahead and do it, but be careful and don't get yourself entangled in it." He turns and strolls out of the room in one powerful swirl.

.....

Everyone gathers in my room with a solemn and depressed air, thinking it's all over now that we can't perform the dance and we got the Princess mad. I tell them not to worry. We

can perform other dances, and now that word has gotten out that the Princess praised “Hua Yue Nong” as a good performance, the customers will surely come in droves to see our talent. I explain to Hong Gu that the Princess is not mad, if she were, she would have shut us own right from the start instead of waiting until now.

But this performance is still her life story, so it’s time to stop it. Now there will always be the legend swirling about this performance, with those who have seen it spreading the word, and those who have not lamenting the missed chance. The Princess has gotten her objective across, and so have we.

A maid enters with a small porter bearing a present, a cage covered in black cloth. Supposedly it was brought by a man who didn’t leave a name, only saying that I will know who it is from when I see it. I pull off the cloth and there they sit, snow white feathers and red ruby eyes. One is napping and the other is looking at me curiously with a cocked head. I gleefully ask for seeds to be brought over. I smile like a silly person and won’t tell Hong Gu who it is from, so she leaves me to bathe in my happiness.

The sleeping pigeon wakes up now there is food and steals a seed from the other one, which doesn’t get mad and allows it to take the seed. “You are quite a precocious (Tao Qi) one, so I’ll call you Xiao Tao. And you are so giving (Qian Rang) so I’ll call you Xiao Qian. I doubt you understand me. I can only speak wolf, not pigeon.”

After dinner I rush over to the Shi Estate, deciding whether to go via the front door or over the walls. The door opens and Shi Buo pokes his head out, explaining Jiu Ye wanted the door left open for me. I rush to the Bamboo Residence, where the bamboo blinds are half pulled. With a twirl I’ve entered the residence without even touching the blinds. Jiu Ye compliments me on my athletic prowess but I’m embarrassed at being so overeager.

I sit down next to him “Thank you for giving me the pigeons. I really like them. Do they have names, because I already gave them one.” He replied “Just numbers, so what did you name them?”

“The bossy and precocious one is called Xiao Tao, and the gentle and giving one is called Xiao Qian.” He smiled “Then that makes you Xiao Yu.” I respond “Yes! The next time I introduce you, I’ll call you Xiao Jiu.”

He smiles and hands me a small whistle “The pigeon trainer says those two are the most talented of all the pigeons he’s trained in years. He never showed his face in front of them so they didn’t imprint on him. In the next month or so, only you can feed them. Once they imprint on you, you don’t even need a cage anymore.”

I look at the intricate whistle, which has a carving of a pair of pigeons flying on it. It has a tiny hole to string a line through to hang around the neck. I try blowing and it makes an ear piercing screeching noise. He tells me this is a special whistle just for pigeons and they will recognize different sounds as different commands. I ask if he’ll teach me?

He replied “Since I gave you the pigeons, how can I refuse to teach you.” He grabs another whistle and proceeds to blow. I hold my ears expecting a shrill noise but instead it’s a simple playful ditty he plays. After he finishes, he demonstrates all the sounds the whistle can make, showing me and asking me to practice.

Outside the window, a warm breeze wafts into the room. Inside, one is teaching and one is

learning, the laughter mixed with work.

An unknown flower scent comes into the room, twirling round the two of us happy people.

My heart feels like it's in motion, this tightening and contracting, holding me in its thrall.

When our eyes touch, it's like there is something, but nothing is said.

This tipsy feeling, like the joy of getting drunk, makes the heart unwilling to care and wanting to continue to descend deeper into this sensation.

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7

Chapter 7: Background Identity

I'm playing with the inkbrush in my hand when Xiao Tao swoops in from outside and directly lands on my hand. I tried to pull back but the ink still spills on my sleeve. Xiao Qian lightly lands on the window and gives Xiao Tao a knowing look, and shoots me a sympathetic one.

I angrily grab Xiao Tao's neck "What number outfit is this? What number? Today I'm going to turn your snowy cuteness into a black crow." I grab the inkbrush and get more ink to brush on Xiao Tao, who flaps his wings and cries desperately. Xiao Qian appears torn, not sure if he should help so he coo'd a few times, then put his head under his wings so he doesn't need to watch anymore.

Xiao Tao appears to understand that I am genuinely angry this time, so he stops struggling and allows me to brush ink on him. I painted a large part of his body black before releasing him.

The sound of clapping comes from the door "What an exciting show, picking on a pigeon." Huo Qu Bing stands by the door and is thoroughly amused.

I angrily reply "I pick on him? Why don't you ask him how he picks on me daily? Food and clothing, there is not a single item he hasn't destroyed." As I was complaining, Xiao Tao suddenly spread his wings and gave his body a big shake before flying outside. When I react and lean my body backwards, my face feels this cold splash like a thousand drops of ink sprayed on my face.

"Xiao Tao! I'm going to braise you!" My raging screams are accompanied by Huo Qu Bing laughing. Flying out the window, that "crow" has become a black spot in the sky.

I turn around and use a handkerchief to wipe my face, with Huo Qu Bing behind me still laughing "I've seen it all, trying to hide is a little too late."

I hollered "Get out! Who said you could come in?"

He laughingly walked out, and I thought he was leaving, but from the yard came the sound of water being fetched. In a short while, he comes back in and hands me a clean handkerchief. I silently take it from him. Once I felt clean, I turned around "Thanks." He looked at me and pointed to his ears. I grabbed the handkerchief and wiped there. He then pointed to his forehead and I wiped, then he pointed to his nose and I wiped. I suddenly stopped and stared at him. His shoulders were shaking with silent laughter. I threw the handkerchief at him and stood up angrily "You should go hang out with Xiao Tao, you two

would suit perfectly.”

He asked with a laugh “Where are you going. I haven’t discussed with you the serious matters.” I shot back “Going to change.”

When I return to the study, he’s flipping through the books on the shelf. When he hears me, he turns “Ms. Jin, are you looking to become a female general?” I snatch back my hand copied “Sun Zi War Tactics” and return it to the bookshelf. “Touching things without an owner’s permission is a shady thing to do.”

“I’m not a gentleman, and you’re not a lady. We’re a perfect match.”

I’m about to retort when Li Yan arrives, but she turns when she sees I have someone with me. I ask her to come, and when she walks over, Huo Qu Bing stares at her but doesn’t say anything. I give him a glance “Do you need a handkerchief to wipe your drool?” He keeps staring but his lips turn up in a smirk “I can control myself still, no need.”

Li Yan gives me a courtesy but looks questioningly at me. Before I can speak, Huo Qu Bing coldly orders “Take your veil off.”

She gives him an icy look while I hurry to explain who he is. The name Huo Qu Bing flows from my lips when she gives me a shocked look and turns to assess him. She gives him a courtesy and gives me one last look to see if I’m making any movements, before taking off her veil. Huo Qu Bing stares at her in an extremely rude way and then says “You can leave!” She puts on her veil, gives him a courtesy, and leaves.

I ask “As pretty as the Empress when she first met the Emperor?”

He touches his chin lightly “I don’t remember Aunt’s looks during her prime, but it’s likely on par. This is less important though. What’s rare is her demeanor was right on point. She was elegant even in a disadvantageous situation, when I was rude to her she didn’t grow shocked, angry, or anxious. She was steely within her femininity. Stronger than you actually!” I coldly huff without responding.

He wonders “When are you planning to send her into the Palace.”

I shake my head “I don’t know. I have some doubts in my mind. If she can’t give me an acceptable response, I don’t want to get involved in her business.”

He laughed “You slowly think it through. Be careful not to get your trump card stolen. Her looks are extraordinary, but the world is vast. First there was Chen Ah Jiao (one of the Great Beauties), next came Empress Wei, and after the Empress Weil is her. You can’t predict that there isn’t another woman in Chang An as beautiful as her.”

I chuckled then ask “You said you came here to discuss serious matters. What?”

“What happened between you and Shi Enterprises?” I answered “We went our own ways.” He reminded me “Shi Enterprises may not as be powerful as it used to be, but it’s still prominent in Chang An. If you are a lone tree now, be careful that when a tree grows too large it will attract the wind.”

I smile “That’s why I want align with the Princess!”

He asks “How big do you want to grow the business?” I thought and then shook my head “I don’t know, one step at a time I guess.”

He shared some information with me “Meng Jiu of Shi Enterprises is an interesting person. Supposedly his mother was a good playmate of the Emperor when they were kids. The Emperor has even held him as a baby. But now he refuses to enter the Palace. Every time he is summoned he refuses. There are few in Chang An who have seen him. One of these days I’d like to meet him.”

My heart felt odd and I opened my mouth, but then closed it and swallowed what I wanted to say. I looked outside and didn’t continue the conversation.

After I walked Huo Qu Bing out, I went to see Li Yan. Along the way I pass Fang Ru’s residence where she is playing the flute, and as a newbie she’s already better than I am. Suddenly the flute stopped playing. From Li Yan Nian’s residence came the sound of the lute, and then the flute started back up. I looked between the two residences and smiled.

Li Yan welcomes me and asks for an explanation. I wanted Huo Qu Bing to see how she stacked up with the Great Beauties, then I ask her to explain to me about her past. If she wants to enter the Palace and needs my help, I don’t want to be used and fooled. She pretends not to understand me, so I laugh and ask to see her hand because I understand a bit of hand reading.

I take her right hand “Lots of lines, a very complicated mind prone to overthinking. The criss-crossing pattern shows the mind is often conflicted, but one line goes ahead, revealing the desire to pursue a goal at all costs. One of your parents is likely Han...” She tries to pull her hand away but I continue “Pursuing a lonely path, vengeance in the heart, the turn upwards to fly high.”

She asks “How did I reveal myself?” I point out “Your eyes are beautiful with lush lashes that are naturally curly, with very white fair skin, and a dance that has its unique flavor.” She doesn’t think it’s that odd. I tell her that only people who grew up in the desert appreciate green nature, which is a life source in the desert. It’s all my conjecture, of course.

I continue – she knew I set up “Hua Yue Nong” to make friends with the Princess and she purposely came here for that, which means she wants to enter the Palace. Her brother doesn’t seem like the greedy type to sell his sister to the Emperor for riches. The Palace is a horrid place with thousands of women vying for the Emperor’s attention, and she is clearly not stupid. Why would she single-mindedly want to go there? She doesn’t appear to covet riches either. So the only answer is “vengeance” But I can’t understand why she, with her intelligence and thoughtfulness, she can’t work this out in her heart. At the age of sixteen, she is at her first blush of beauty, but her eyes are so cold. I found out from her second brother Li Guan Li that her father pampered her but her mother was strangely very strict with her. That means she grew up relatively happy, so where did this vengeance come from?

She explains that her mother was a Han, and they grew up in the Central Plains, but her mother never thought of herself as a Han, and made Li Yan also feel the same way. She gives her real last name, which is a Luo Lan last name. She asks if I am familiar with Xi Yu territory and it’s kingdoms. I nod, Xi Yu has 36 different kingdoms and tribes, including Luo Lan, et. al.

Luo Lan is situated right outside the Yu Men Gate, which makes it at a critical juncture. If

the Han want to attack the Xiong Nu, or the Xiong Nu want to attack the Han, passing through Luo Lan is a must. The culture of Luo Lan is closer to the Xiong Nu so it has always aligned with them. But the current Han Emperor refuses to allow Xiong Nu to block the Han's westward expansion so has set out to align with the Xi Yu kingdoms, with Luo Lan being the first to be persuaded to change sides. Papa used to tell me the exploits of the Han Emperor and how he set out to make new allies one by one and succeeded. Papa would get excited and say that the Han conquering the Xiong Nu was just a matter of time.

The same story as told by Jiu Ye turned into something more. In passing through Luo Lan, there was a very dangerous and deadly desert region. The Han Emperor demanded the Luo Lan King provide assistance to the Han convoys. But the Han convoys constantly abused their Luo Lan guides, so the Luo Lan King decided to refuse to comply with the Han Emperor's request. In a fury, the Han Emperor had the Luo Lan King assassinated. Stuck between the Han and the Xiong Nu, Luo Lan was between a rock and a hard place, If either side got angry, Luo Lan would suffer. In order to keep the peace, Luo Lan even had to send one of its princes to the Han dynasty and another to the Xiong Nu as pawns.

The other Xi Yu kingdoms all have the same fates, trying to survive while stuck between two warring giants. One wrong move and they are wiped out. When Jiu Ye told me this story, while he acknowledged the Emperor's vast conquering strategy, in his voice was more pity for the Xi Yu kingdoms.

Li Yan tells me she knows what she is doing. From the moment she was born, she came with her mother's hatred of the Han. Her mother's master, and also Li Yan's birth father, was a Luo Lan man who once refused the unreasonable demands of a Han envoy. In rage, the Han envoy had her father whipped and then tortured to death. Her mother escaped, though she was pregnant with Li Yan at that time. She met a traveling musician and married him, becoming his second wife and mother to his sons. When Li Yan was small, her mother took her back to where her father was tortured and died to pay their respects to him.

"She pointed to a spot in the desert, telling me this was where father was whipped, and this is where father was buried alive. How father slowly died, mother will never forget the image of father buried in the sand by the Hans. A handsome young man who eventually shriveled up into a dried up human being the size of a child. Her descriptions were vivid and I felt like I could see what happened back then. I had nightmares every night and would wake up in tears. Mother laughed and said that was father's vengeance. Year after year, mother took me back to Luo Lan, telling me never to forget."

While Li Yan's eyes fill with tears, she's smiling and I tell her not to smile. "Mother would not let me cry. Never cry. Mother said that tears would not save me. I can only smile, I can smile." I asked if Li Yan Nian knew her background, She says they don't. When her mother married her step father, she lavished all her love on Li Guan Li as an outlet for the guilt she felt towards her birth father.

I paced, wondering what to do. We all have hate, but my Papa only wanted me to be happy, whereas Li Yan's mother only wants her to get revenge. The sun is setting and the birds are returning, accompanied by the sounds of the lute playing, I lean against the

window and look outside.

“Li Yan, I suggest the smartest thing is for you to forget this all. Your mother is your mother, she cannot force her vengeance on you. She was not a good mother, using her pain to torment you. If your birth father was a good man deserving of a woman’s love, then he would want what brings you happiness and not for you to struggle your entire life in hatred. If you choose revenge, then your life is over before it even begins. Because the target is the Han Emperor, so by default it is the entire Han Empire. The price for your revenge is your entire life, you will never find your own happiness.”

She thanked me “It isn’t just for revenge, I am also the daughter of Luo Lan, with love towards Luo Lan. I am proud of being a Luo Lan person. We may not have the riches and etiquette of the Han, but we have our plains, laughter, and warm embrace.”

I continue “We don’t have warm houses but we can see where the sky and earth touch. We don’t have wide streets but we can race our horse anytime.”

She responds “The world is so vast, and we just want a piece of land where we can herd sheep and sing songs. Why won’t the Han dynasty stop tormenting Luo Lan, give us a chance to live?”

I tell her that the “Tao Te Jing” (Ethics and Morality Manual) tells us that there is no permanence in this world and things will disappear in time. One day there will be no Han dynasty or Luo Lan.

She retorts “I won’t argue these principles with you. Let me ask you. If a young man is about to be killed, will you say to him ‘If you don’t die at 40, you’ll die at 50, if you don’t die at 50 you’ll die at 60. Since you’re going to die anyway, why struggle, just let yourself get killed now.’”

She asks for my help. I tell her she’ll get into the Palace regardless of my help, but she believes going through me is the best way. I agree, though I don’t know what she is thinking. If she tries to assassinate the Emperor, it doesn’t solve anything since there is already a Crown Prince, plus we would all get punished along with her. She smiles, that is not her way. She doesn’t know martial arts and this is not a long term solution.

I shrug “I suppose it’s curiosity. I don’t have a side I stand with, so I can support whatever I want.” She can tell I have agreed to assist and her eyes grow red-rimmed. She has never shared her thoughts with anyone, and thanks me for listening to her, it made her feel much better.

I ask her what the heck is going on between Li Yan Nian and Fang Ru, and she laughs, blaming me since I asked them to create a new song together. She goes to peek but I don’t follow since I don’t want to be a third wheel.

I go back to Hong Gu’s quarters and she hands me a handkerchief, needing to talk to me. The handkerchief is worn after many washes, and instead of being embroidered with the usual flowers or leaves, instead it has a vine along the side that formed the character Li. It was beautifully done and seductive.

Hong Gu explains that the third young master Li (name Li Gan) found it in the courtyard and wants to know who it belongs to. She knew it was likely Li Yan’s but didn’t know

what I was planning so told him she would find out.

Hong Gu follows with more “The third young master Li is the son of General Li Guang, one of the highest officials in court. Even though he was born of such high standing, he’s nothing like young master Huo. He has no arrogance, but his martial arts prowess and scholarly learnings are one of the most accomplished among the young men of Chang An. With the war with the Xiong Nu, he has a bright future ahead of him. Just by looking at a handkerchief with the word “Li” embroidered on it has made Li Gan head over hells for Li Yan, if he ever saw her face, he might as well give his soul to her.”

Initially I wanted to return the handkerchief to Li Yan and tell her what happened, but I changed my mind and kept it, telling Hong Gu to find some random girl named Li and tell Li Gan that the handkerchief belongs to her.

Hong Gu stares at me “I can’t figure out what you guys are doing. Your actions towards Li Yan indicate that you want to make her famous, but thus far you haven’t done anything. And if the third young master Li isn’t even good enough for her, it’s hard to find a better option in Chang An.” She proceeds to eat but keeps staring at me “You two....you two....”.

It’s late and Xiao Tao and Xiao Qian still haven’t returned. I’m about to get impatient when suddenly Xiao Qian returns bearing a cloth wrapped around his leg. I smile and take the cloth where small characters are written on it.

“What mess did Xiao Tao get into? How did he become a black crow? You guys fight and I’m the one who suffers. I wore a white robe today and Xiao Tao landed on me. Even though he was half dry already, he was still dirty and my white robe was completely ruined. Now it needs to be thoroughly cleaned. I heard your throat wasn’t feeling well yesterday? Did you boil water accordingly to my recommendation?”

I take out an already cut handkerchief and write “Don’t spoil him, he’s not even afraid of me now. The littlest infraction and he’ll run away. My throat is much better. It’s just that the medicine is bitter so the second time around I didn’t put as much in.” I secured the cloth around Xiao Qian and sent him flying into the sky.

I look down at the ceramic jar in front of me, with gold and silver flower vines intwined that seem especially pretty in the lamp light. I take a drink of water and take out another cloth to write “After researching in a book, I learned that the gold and silver flower have another name of “Yuen Yang Teng” (Lover’s Vines). The flowers first bloom white, and then turn yellow, which creates this gold and silver contrast. The flowers always remain intertwined, never leaving each other. I decide to help Li Yan, because her mind is set and she’s going to do it regardless. Until I am certain of your [she is addressing Jiu Ye in this diary entry] real identity and intentions, why not have Li Yan owe me one this time. In the future, our goals might be aligned, it might not. Neither of us gave each other any promises. I don’t know if I’m doing the right thing, but my feelings towards Li Yan are complicated. Some grudging respect and some sympathy. And perhaps some disgust at myself. Like someone said to me, she is more capable than me.”

My heart hurts and I finish writing. I put the cloth away and see that I’ve already accumulated so many diary entries. Xiao Qian has returned and I remove another cloth where Jiu Ye has sent another detailed medical recommendation, this time with honey in it

to alleviate the bitterness. He tells me Xiao Tao refuses to come home, so likely Xiao Qian will go back to spend the night there. He tells me to go to sleep early.

I tap Xiao Qian's head "You have no backbone." He cocked his head at me and I wave my hand "Go find your precious wifey!" and then he takes off.

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I kneel and bow before the Princess who tells me to rise and asks why I am here. I explain I wanted the Princess' guidance. There is a woman whose looks far surpass mine, with elegance in dance, intelligence and wit, and a melodic voice. The Princess laughs, knowing that I am running four dancing houses, so for me to praise a woman like this means she really is special.

I explain that she is the younger sister to the musician Li Yan Nian and has her brother's talent. The Princess orders me to bring her. I bow and ask the Princess for more time, I am preparing a jade carefully before unveiling it. She naturally wonders why I told her this early then?

I tell her that a good war tactician needs to announce the battle in advance to prepare. I am just preparing the weapon, but it is up to the Princess to set the stage. She replies "You are so forthright, reminding me a bit of Huo Qu Bing."

"Your highness is wise and thoughtful. I don't need to beat around the bush and hide, which would only make the Princess think less of me."

She thinks and asks "I heard that the money you used to buy the dancing houses, half of it was borrowed from the girls who work at the dancing houses. In your promissory note, you promised to repay it all – one year, with an interest of 20%, within two years with an interest of 50%."

I reply that I couldn't find so much money right away but couldn't let this great business opportunity pass by, so this was my last resort.

She gives me an assessing look. "This last resort move was brilliant. Luo Yu House is doing booming business, and the other dancing girls who see this would be eager to bet their money on you. The word profit unites a pile of loose sand so that everyone is now aligned with you. Once you have everyone's heart on your side, that is already half way to success. You can go now! Seeing how you handle things, I know you will not disappoint me. I wait to meet this beautiful jade of yours."

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 1 - Chapter

8

Chapter 8: Shocking Encounter

Outside is thunder and pouring rain, inside we sit and I stare at Li Yan “I’ve already met with the Princess, so in the shortest time necessary, you will have to do everything I ask.” She nods. I point to all the books and ask her to read and understand the tactical manuals. She will be in the Palace and engaging in political intrigue with the Emperor and all the other women. The Emperor ascended to the throne at the age of sixteen, and today is thirty six years old. A man at the pinnacle of his life must be well versed in battle and wits. He is sometimes cold, sometimes warm.

Li Yan looks at the books “Since the Emperor is my enemy, but also my one ally in the Palace, our battle is between a man and a woman. I’ve never been intimate with a man before. In this battle, if I lose my heart first, I will have lost, right?”

I point to the anatomy texts and she wrinkled her nose that it sounds like trying to probe the innards of the Emperor. Hong Gu pipes up that the books we needs are the ones about male-female intimate relations. Li Yan and my cheeks both heat up. She whispers to me “Xiao Yu, have you read it before?”

I haven’t, and those kinds of book are very rare and almost impossible to acquire. Only the Palace with its vast repository might have a copy. Leaving me no choice but to go find Huo Qu Bing.

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“I need to bother you to find a book for me” I keep my head lowered staring at my shoes.

Huo Qu Bing is leaning on the cushion and casually drawls “What book? Not yet another military tactical manual?”

I lower my head even more and softly answer “No.”

He asks with a hint of exasperation “What’s wrong with you today? What is the matter that you can’t just come out and say it. Hemming and hawing.”

I take a deep breath and whisper “It’s.....it’s a man and a woman.....man woman..... concerning that.”

“What?” He suddenly sits up straight and stares at me. I keep my head burrowed and stare at the ground, not making a sound. I can feel that even my neck is burning hot, my face must surely be on fire.

He started laughing “What? What is that? I don’t understand what you are saying. You need to be more specific.”

I suddenly stand up “Forget it!”

He grabbed my sleeve and smiled “Is it for you to read or for someone else?”

I don’t dare to turn back and look at him “For someone else.”

He laughed “That kind of book, even the Palace might only have one copy. I’ll have someone hand copy and deliver it to you in a few days. You should read it as well. It’ll come in handy, If there is anything you don’t understand, I can.....” Before he finished talking, I had already jerked my sleeve from his hand and quickly taken off.

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I sit with Li Yan in silence while Hong Gu teases us. She’ll find some of Chang An’s most experienced ladies of the night to come and educate Li Yan personally, She teases that I ought to sit in on the lesson, it’ll sure come in handy someday. Both Li Yan and I are completely red-faced. After Hong Gu leaves, I tell Li Yan to work on her eyes. She doesn’t have the eyes of a sixteen year old without a care in this world. Her eyes are filled with deep pain that even I could see through, she is clearly not going to be able to convince the Emperor. I want her to go out and observe normal girls and check out the look in their eyes.

I tell her to start crying from now on, despite her mother telling her never to cry, She needs to learn to cry on a dime, and cry prettily and sorrowfully. I proceed to tell her the story of Empress Wei.

“Rumor has it that when the Emperor first brought Wei Zhi Fu into the Palace, the then current Empress refused to relent. So the Emperor had no choice and could not see Wei Zhi Fu for an entire year. When he finally saw her again, she got on her knees and cried and begged the Emperor to release her from the Palace. Today we all know the end of that story. Tears and laughter are tools that she needs to learn how to use it wisely,

I tell her that these are the hard things, the rest is easier. We’ll go through the Emperor’s life story and get to know his personality. Li Yan gets up and fixes her clothes before kneeling to give me a formal bow. I want to help her up but she grabs my hand “Please accept this bow from me. Because in the future, you will have to be bowing to me. This is the only time I can show my gratitude for what you have done for me.” I accept her bow.

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“The gold silver flower seeds have arrived and I asked the gardener to plant it in my new garden. By Spring time next year it will have bloomed. I want to ask you to come view the flowers with me. Will you come? Should I plant some at the Shi Estate? You treat me so well, always carefully answering my every question. My requests, even if it has nothing to do with Shi Enterprises, you always agree. But exactly where do you put me in your heart? Sometimes I feel you getting closer and closer to me, but when I reach out my hand, you suddenly turn away. Why?.....”

I hold my brush, why do I have to always test and probe his feelings. I put the handkerchief away and walk outside. I ask Li Yan if I can ask Li Yan Nian some

questions. As we're walking over, I softly ask how she's coming along in her studies. She doesn't answer, only telling me to sit in on the lessons if I am so curious. I laugh, telling her I want to learn from the best, so I'll wait for her to finish her education.

She tells me not to spend my days just running the business, I need to worry about my future as well. She can see that the Big Boss treats me well, and the way I am so careful around him, he must be special. If he's not married then..... I cut her off and squeeze her cheeks playfully, telling her that because she's off getting married soon doesn't mean she needs to pull me down with her. She huffs that her good intentions are so wasted on me.

When we arrive, Fang Ru is leaving Li Yan Nian's residence and she quickly explains she came to inquire about a tune. I tease that I didn't even ask, and she's already trying to explain. Li Yan secretly pokes me and lets Fang Ru scurry off. I tease Li Yan for sticking up for her future sister-in-law already. She warns me not to use my jokester attitude on Fang Ru and her brother, who are gentle people.

Li Yan Nian welcomes us inside. I ask how it is in the Palace? Since he was recommended by Princess Pingyang, everyone is very respectful towards him. I heard he's been praised by the Emperor and already rewarded. Li Yan can tell I'm beating around the bush and tells me to cut to the chase.

I drink water and look Li Yan Nian in the face "There is a very introverted person who also loves music. If a girl wants to tell him her feelings, but not sure how he feels and doesn't dare be direct, does Master Li have any suggestions on how the girl can reveal her feelings in a way that is easier to accept?"

He stares and starts to think, while Li Yan starts laughing at me. As someone who has read all the military manuals yet I need to ask for advice on this, she tells me consider the things I said to her, and practice it myself,

I calmly answer Li Yan "I don't consider this a battle, because from the very beginning I had opened my heart. I have no defenses, I'm not afraid of him coming in. I'm afraid that he won't come in. I have no calm and calculation here, just my heart."

After much thought, Li Yan Nian confessed that he was but a musician and all he knows is how to use music to convey emotion. He heard I played the flute as well, so he suggested that since Li Yan also played, she can teach me since we spend so much time together. Li Yan suddenly took off after looking unhappy, so I gestured for Li Yan Nian to stay while I chased after her.

Finding her alone in the room, looking out the window, her loneliness was palpable. I tell her "You can still change your mind. The worst that can happen is the Princess is upset, but I can resolve that."

She softly replied "I really envy you, to live so free. You can do what you want, and pursue that happiness that you want."

"You're also doing what you want now, no one is forcing you."

"I am forcing myself. Jin Yu, you don't understand, and I hope you never understand what it feels like to force oneself to do something."

I left her alone, and as I was walking back to my room, Xiao Tao landed on my shoulder

with a cloth note on his leg. I was so happy I ran to my room.

.....

I ask the Princess if we can meet in a Bamboo Forest in her residence, sharing with her the understanding that women are like flowers, needing accompaniment to best display their beauty. We arrive right at dusk, so the sky is red-tipped. Li Yan stands next to a bamboo tree with her back to us. I tell the Princess that I did not pose Li Yan this way, or that she even knows the Princess will be meeting her today.

The Princess sighs “How can a person’s back already conjure up all these thoughts. I want to see her face, but am afraid I will be disappointed. Her face cannot disappoint her form. This anxious feeling is indeed something that would not happen had I met her in a room.”

The Princess walks forward and Li Yan hears footsteps and turns around. She has a smile and is pointing to the setting sun, about to say something when she recognizes the Princess and immediately kneels and bows. The Princess has her rise and compliments her simply adorned beauty as such a precious jade that she was loathe to see Li Yan kneeling.

I look at Li Yan, telling her that this is all I can do, the rest is up to her. She understands. Going there was the two of us, returning is just me. The anxious Li Guan Li asks if the Princess likes Li Yan and I confirm it. Li Yan Nian looks thunderous and turns to punch a tree. He wonders if perhaps his biggest regret in life will be coming to Luo Yu House.

“Even though my sister said this is what she wanted, it’s her own idea, but I still can’t help but hate you. You disappoint me. Do you want riches and wealth that much? So much that you won’t hesitate to sacrifice a girl’s future?”

I give a small smile “Hate all you want. Li Yan has already stepped on a path of no return. Rather than object, you need to help her. You need to use all your talent to help her.”

I leave him and go back to my room, telling Hong Gu what happened. For Li Yan to impress the Princess, who has seen countless beauties, is quite a feat. The Princess will be sure to devise the best opportunity to present Li Yan to the Emperor. Sitting there, I suddenly get up and grab the handkerchief with the “Li” embroidered on it. I hold it over the fire until little by little it burns up and the remnants are just black charred bits on the ground. What was before could no longer be distinguished.

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I’m holding an invitation from the Princess to attend her birthday celebration at her estate. Hong Gu thinks it’s because the Princess likes Li Yan so much she’s extended this invite to us. She wants to dress us, but I tell her to dress herself. I’ll wear a nice outfit with a few accessories, that will be enough. I tell her to trust me on this one.

The banquet is situated on the banks of the lake, with lanterns lit illuminating everything. The dais where the guest of honor sits is still empty. We’re seated at the very end of the banquet area, where we are promptly ignored by the guests already enjoying the event. Suddenly a silence descends and everyone gets on their knees and bows “Long live your majesty the Emperor. Long live your highness the Empress.”

Hidden in the back, I can observe everyone carefully. The Han Emperor that Papa and Yi Zhi Xie often talked about is sitting right in the middle of the banquet. I remember asking

Yi Zhi Xie many years ago whether the Emperor was a good looking as Yi Zhi Xie. It is only now, years later, that I have an answer. He is handsome, but not as good looking as Yi Zhi Xie. But his aura was more powerful than Yi Zhi Xie. But then again, the Yi Zhi Xie that I knew was before he became the Shan Yu. Who knows what he's like now?

I looked at the Empress and was stunned. She was like the water, as soft, gentle, flowing and crystal clear as the water. Under the light, she is like a fairy pond under the moonlight, an astonishing beauty. What wilted flower? There is a kind of beauty that never fades or wilts with time.

Hong Gu sighs "That is a woman amongst women. No wonder back then the Emperor went up against the Dowager Queen and the Princess to have her." I nod.

Princess Pingyang is sitting with a large man with a gentle demeanor, who is likely the Great General Wei. He's like the stories say – physically brawn but calm and composed on the inside. He and the Empress just sat there watching the Princess and the Emperor happily chat.

The people on the main dais are all relatives of the Imperial family or high ranking officials. Everyone appears to be enjoying themselves but their eyes always stray back to the Emperor to follow his mood and his lead. Underneath the guise of getting along, they are trying to gain the Emperor's favor. Only Huo Qu Bing pays attention to his food. He occasionally raises his head but his expression is cold and he doesn't acknowledge others around him. He doesn't socialize with others and they don't socialize with him. Since the banquet started, there was only one twenty some year old young man who raised his glass to toast Huo Qu Bing, who smiled and toasted back.

I find out from Hong Gu that the young man is Li Gan, the third young master of the General Li. I see that she described him correctly before, handsome and dashing, but with an air of confidence being born into a military family. Suddenly the banquet quieted and Li Yan Lian arrived and began to play. After some time, joining the sound of the lute was the sound of a flute rising from the distance. Everyone turned to see where the flute was coming from, and on a small boat sat Li Yan playing the flute. She is veiled but her seductive beauty hidden within is evident to all.

After she bows to the Emperor and the Princess, she suddenly steps off the boat and appears to float on the water. She starts to dance in the moonlight on the surface of the lake, a water fairy come to life. Everyone stares in shock while Li Yan Nian's music hits a crescendo. Li Yan tosses out a long ribbon and starts to dance with it, creating spirals in the air that is in tune with the music. As the eyes follow the ribbon, suddenly Li Yan vanishes, like she went back to the water.

The first to snap out of it was Huo Qu Bing, the Great General Wei, and myself, while everyone is still staring at the lake. I turn to look at the Emperor, while the Great General Wei and Huo Qu Bing immediately look towards the Empress (their sister and aunt, respectively), Empress Wei has a small smile and is still looking at the lake, But within her brows it looks like she's suppressing tears. Li Gan looks amazed, while Li Yan Nian just looks at his lute with an expressionless look.

In this silence the Emperor's voice is heard "Bring this girl to meet me." Hong Gu holds my hand with a smile, while Li Gan's hand shakes and he spills his wine, but he quickly

composes himself.

The Emperor and the Princess banter, with her revealing that she had wooden boards built under the lake surface so that Li Yan's would appear to be dancing on water. The banquet finally ends and everyone disperses. We wait until most people have left before we take out leave. Hong Gu looks happy but I can't seem to find the joy in this. Planning something is one thing, seeing it happen is another. The Empress Wei entranced the Emperor years ago by performing a dance for him at the Princess estate. Years later, the same thing has happened again, now by a different woman. When the Emperor saw Li Yan tonight, did he recall Wei Zhi Fu of years ago?

When I was a child I loved banquets, it was always a happy occasion. Even when Papa didn't want to go, I would find a way to attend. Sitting at today's Imperial banquet, I finally see clearly that underneath all the riches and wealth hides a bitter cold. I suddenly miss Papa a lot, and when I'm down the image that comes to mind is Jiu Ye. I want to see his warm figure under the lamp light. One lamp, one person, one warmth. I tell Hong Gu to go home by herself, I want to walk.

Under the moonlight, the occasional dog bark breaks the silence of the night. As I'm walking, a carriage passes by which abruptly stops. Huo Qu Bing jumps out of the carriage and stares at me "What are you doing here? Were you at the Princess' banquet earlier?"

I nod, and he coldly says "Congratulations." I bite down on what I wanted to say and continue walking. He sends the carriage off and quietly walks besides me. I wanted to ask him to leave, but seeing the expression on his face, I can't say anything, so we walk in silence.

The carriage goes far and the night quiets down like we are. On the long street there is only the sound of our footsteps on the ground. He looked ahead and softly said "Some things you can anticipate in advance, but seeing it unfold is a different experience." I tell him to yell at me if it'll make him feel better.

He gave me a sideways glance and with a smile said "If I was mad it's gone now. It's rare to see you so subdued, plus what happened was as expected. I just didn't expect Li Yan's entrance to be so well thought out, conquering all in one fell swoop. Li Yan understood strategy, first she had Li Yan Nian use a tune to engage the Emperor's attention, then her appearance was both stunning and still secretive. It was a truly exciting performance tonight."

The moon is bright and the light blanketed the entire street, but I can only see the path right in front of me. What is at the end of the lane I cannot clearly see. The first meeting between Li Yan and Liu Che (the name of the Emperor) is both calculated yet uncertain. Li Yan won this round, but what about the future?

We walk in silence, based on the path it appears Huo Qu Bing wants to walk me back to Luo Yu House. We turn into another street where at the end a lantern illuminates the sign "Tian Xiang House". A few people are leaving Tian Xiang House, and the most popular dancers are actually personally sending them off. I check out these customers and my heart lurches. My knees grow weak and I almost collapse on the ground. Huo Qu Bing reaches over to support me, but I'm still staring straight ahead. It's not possible! How

could he be here on the streets of Chang An?

He's wearing a Han style outfit, standing straight and proud under the lantern light, a white robe encircled with jade, elegant and refined. Because he is a Xiong Nu, his features are very defined, like a knife blade's sharpness type of handsome. But his demeanor is distant and cold, like a thousand feet of snow, the cold radiating from him. The lantern normally gives off warmth, but around him there is only chill. Surrounded by warm flowers, it's like he's standing all alone on a snowy mountain top, always solitary. So this is what he looks like after becoming the Shan Yu. Between his eyes there is no warmth and softness when once he was the smiling and dashing Lord.

In a blink of an eye I cannot move, cannot speak, just standing there dumbfounded as they walk towards me. Once I react, it's like I'm back in the desert, trying to escape with Yu Dan for our lives, telling me that I need to run and hide. I immediately turn around and look everywhere, but all around me are closed houses with nowhere to hide. I want to run away but Huo Qu Bing grabs my arm "What are you afraid of?"

I hear the footsteps almost to my back, and in a moment of hopelessness and abject fear, I dive into Huo Qu Bing's arms and embrace him, my head buried in his shoulder. He's momentarily stunned, and then his arms slowly encircle me. He whispers in my ear "As long as I am here, no one in Chang An city can hurt you."

A rough laughter breaks the silence, "The girls in Chang An are quite passionate! The carefree nature is like our....Xi Yu girls. That backside looks like....."

Huo Qu Bing makes a move but I squeeze his back, so he retracts his arms.

A soft cough and the man's words trail off. A very familiar yet completely unfamiliar voice speaks up "Young master please forgive us. My servant is careless with his words. He didn't mean any disrespect or insult. Coming from Xi Yu, just a little rough around the edges."

My body continues to shake uncontrollably. He's standing right next to me, I never thought I would ever see him again. I can't believe that, years later, I would reunite with Yi Zhi Xie on the streets of Chang An. If I supposedly make a move, will he die by my hands? Not possible, in this place, with his prowess and current position, his servants must all be martial arts experts. Plus his own skill is the best in all of Xiong Nu. But is it because I can't do it physically, or because I don't want to do it emotionally?

Huo Qu Bing powerfully embraces me, letting me know that he's here to handle this. His voice is cold "You all best scram and disappear from my eyes."

"You rude....."

"Hmmm?" Yi Zhi Xie's iight voice immediately silences the others.

A soft playful voice pipes up "My master so graciously apologized already, but the young master was so rude in return. What a waste of a good looking form."

Huo Qu Bing grabs me and twirls a few times, and the sound of metal darts hit the ground. Huo Qu Bing is furious and about to push me aside when I continue to embrace him and beg "Let them go, please, please....."

“Duo Er, what are you doing?” Yi Zhi Xie’s voice sounds calm but underneath I can sense his anger.

Duo Er? And still with the same temper? Mu Da Duo? She is here as well.

Mu Da Duo fakes a laugh “Young master’s skill is quite good! A genuine hero, no wonder you have such a temper. I was wrong, will the young master forgive me.”

In all of Chang An, there is likely no one who would dare to try and injure Huo Qu Bing and afterwards still stand there able to talk. Huo Qu Bing controls his rage and just spits out “Get lost!”

A few cold scoffs are drowned out by Yi Zhi Xie’s one word of “Let’s go.” All I hear are footsteps scurrying away, and in a few moments the street is quiet again, the night returned to normal. But I am covered in cold sweat.

Huo Qu Bing softly said “They’re gone.” I tried to stand straight but my body is limp and I almost slip. He hurries to hold onto me, and my head rests on his shoulders. I make no sound or movement. In a few short moments, I feel like I experienced a life and death battle, my body and soul are exhausted.

He quietly stands there until I raise my head to leave his embrace. He laughs “Done using me so you’re going to toss me aside now?” I force a smile and say “Thank you.” He checks me out from head to toe, holding his chin and giving me an assessing look. He gives a naughty smile “This kind of assistance is what I am happy to give. A beauty in my embrace is a great joy. But next time, it won’t be a simple “thank you” that will be enough to dismiss me. I’ll want a more substantive response.”

I bend down to look for the fallen metal darts “Who was thanking you for the embrace? I was thanking you for not asking me who they were.”

“If you want to tell me, if I don’t ask you’ll tell me. But if you want to bury your past, you will never explain. I know only the Jin Yu that I know.” Huo Qu Bing crouched on the ground to help me look.

I startled, looking at him, but he merely lowered his head to keep searching “There is one over here.” As he reached out to grab it, I immediately say “Don’t use your hand.”

Taking out a handkerchief from my shirt, I gently pick up the metal dart. After examining it carefully, I confirm that it belongs to Mu Da Duo. It appears that she is doing well. All these years later, I am no longer the me of the past, whereas her personality remains the same.

“Trying to hurt someone due to a verbal tussle, and it’s poisonous?” Huo Qu Bing stares at the metal dart with his face dark and stern.

I shake my head, trying to explain “It’s not poison. She just loves to make mischief. It’s just coated with something to make a person itch. If you were hit, you wouldn’t die, but you’ll be painfully itchy.”

Huo Qu Bing looks suspicious “No man would be that pointless, so it’s a girl? No wonder her voice was a bit odd.” I nod my head.

After Huo Qu Bing brings me back to the house and is about to bid me farewell, I just

stand there staring at him. It's just so hard to explain. After awhile, seeing that I'm not going to talk, he gently says "Relax. That man had an extraordinary demeanor. His servants are also not ordinary. They are clearly not ordinary foreign merchants. But I won't dispatch anyone to investigate their background." I gratefully bowed to him and turn to go inside when he calls me with a soft voice "If anything happens you have to come find me. Remember that you are not alone in Chang An."

His eyes show the warmth inside and I look at him for awhile. The anxiety in my heart slowly melts away. I vigorously nod my head and give him a bright smile. "Sleep well." I watch him leave until he disappears from sight, before I go inside.

It is the dark of night but I don't feel like sleeping. I hold a cup and stare at the light, watching the wax slowly melt away. It feels like each drop is burning into my heart.

Why is Yi Zhi XIe in Chang An? What is his purpose? To find allies? It's like life cannot be anticipated, right when I thought I had thoroughly buried my past, in the sudden illumination of a lantern light I see him again. Papa, I promised you not to go find Yi Zhi XIe, that I would do my best to forget the Xiong Nu, and I have arrived in the Han dynasty. But whey did he re-appear in the streets of the Han dynasty?

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 1 - Chapter 9.1

Chapter 9: Heart Song

Normally I would send someone to Tian Xiang House to find out where Yi Zhi Xie went. But the normally thorough me did not do that, instead choosing to stay in and go out less. I practice my flute or play games with the girls. Am I purposely avoiding and forgetting? Even with so many years that pass, I'm still afraid to face it. With these thoughts, I keep playing a tune that explains my confusion.

A voice rang from outside the window "I didn't want to bother you until you finished that tune, but why does it go on forever?" as he rapped the door.

I lower the flute "Door is not locked, come in." Huo Qu Bing opened the door and entered, picking up the flute to twirl it around "What were you playing just now? It sounded familiar, but I can't seem to place it."

I'm glad he doesn't pay attention to these things and release a pent up breath. I take back the flute and put it back in the box "What do you want?" He looked at me carefully "To see how you are doing?" I raise my spirits and give him a laugh "I'm fine." He asks "Hiding in the house all day long is fine?" I stare at the table "I feel like not going out."

He suddenly sticks his head in front of my face, eyes pinning mine as he asks "Were those books you asked me for, meant for Li Yan?" He changed the subject so quickly it took me a second to register, before turning my head and answering yes.

He softly whispers in my ear "Did you read it?" His warm breath against my ear causes my face to turn red, and in my sudden nervousness, I shove him away. He touches his chin and stares at me, grinning, and his stares makes me uncomfortable all over. I jump off the pallet "I have things to do, you hurry up and leave."

He slowly stood up "A woman's mood changes faster than the desert weather. It was sunny just a minute ago and now it's blanket by sand and storm."

I open the door without a word and stare at him, indicating he needs to go. His expression hardens and he coldly walks past me. As I'm closing the door, he turns back "Your frigid expression makes a person's insides tingle." I glare at him and shut the door with a bang.

As I'm thinking angry thoughts about Huo Qu Bing, suddenly there is a rap at the door. I ask "Why are you back?" and Hong Gu responds "Where else should I be if not here?"

I laugh and open the door "I was just so annoyed at someone and my anger isn't directed at you." She's happy to see me lively again after being so down and mopey for the last few

days. I startle, having been annoyed by Huo Qu Bing, I was so busy being upset that most of my anxiety these past few days have mostly dissipated. Did he....did he do it on purpose?

Hong Gu and I walk and discuss new business opportunities when suddenly there is a young man harassing a dancer in the courtyard. Hong Gu and I try to intervene, and when the man turns around and sees me, he orders me to halt since I've already turned to leave.

I pretend not to hear and rush off. She rushes to my side and grabs my arms, but I shake her off and take off sprinting. She cries behind me in Xiong Nu language “Big sister Yu Jin, I know it’s you, I know it’s you.....” As she talks her voice is already a woman’s voice filled with tears.

I stop but still don’t turn around. She walks up to me and takes a deep breath “It’s just me here goofing off, the Shan Yu is not here.” I turn and face her, the two of us assessing the other person. We don’t talk, and Hong Gu takes the dancer and they quickly leave.

“Why are you still the same way? Behaving so boldly in Chang An? Deciding to harass a lady?” I ask with a laugh. Mu Da Duo suddenly grabs me and starts crying “They are said you were dead. They all said you were dead. I cried for an entire year. Why did Yu Dan swear to the Heavens until the day he died that you were dead?”

I thought I was strong, but my eyes fill with tears, so I bite my lips not to let it fall. “Yu Dan, Yu Dan....you saw him before he died?”

Mu Da Duo cries and nods “The Shan Yu didn’t believe you were dead in the beginning. He knew how close we were as kids, so he sent me to go search for you. But Yu Dan told me that you died, and he buried your corpse in the desert.” I hand her a handkerchief but am too afraid to ask what happened after Yu Dan was captured.

“Big sister, are you a dancer here? How much money will it take to buy your freedom?” Mu Da Duo asks as she wipes her tears. “This house is mine, I run it.” I give her a warm smile.

Mu Da Duo hits her forehead and laughs “I’m so stupid. No one in this world can force big sister to do what she doesn’t want to do.”

I have a slight smile but don’t laugh out loud, so Mu Da Duo’s smile disappears. She grows somber “Big sister, the Shan Yu did not kill Yu Dan. Yu Dan got sick and died.”

I coldly laugh “Got sick and died? Is that what happened? Yu Dan played with us since we were kids, has he ever been sick or weak? As a joke we once pushed him in the lake in the dead of Winter, causing us to catch a cold, but he was perfectly fine.”

Mu Da Duo continues to hurriedly explain “Big sister, it’s true. If the Shan Yu wanted to kill Yu Dan, he could have done it when he captured him. But the Shan Yu gave strict orders to capture you guys alive. Otherwise why would you guys be chased for days and nights on end? And you don’t know, but when the Shan Yu learned that you guys were injured during the pursuit, he was so furious that his face turned white. I have never seen the Shan Yu that angry before, which frightened the entire army of warriors to get on their knees. The Shan Yu refused to believe that you were dead, he kept questioning Yu Dan over and over again about how you supposedly died. But Yu Dan’s explanation was so

believable. The Shan Yu flipped the entire Xi Yu territory upside down but he couldn't find you. All the roads leading to the Han were manned by extra guards, but no one saw someone like you. So later we believed what Yu Dan said."

I coldly reply "I don't care about this. Even if Yu Dan died of a sickness, but my Papa and Yu Dan's mom, don't tell me they killed themselves? Who caused all of this? Even if he didn't kill them, they died because of him."

Mu Da Duo's tear fall and she shakes her head "Big sister, I don't understand why Teacher would kill himself. The Shan Yu kept trying to convince the Teacher to stay and assist him. If Teacher refused, he can ask the Shan Yu to let him go, so why did he kill himself? That day I had just gone to sleep when I heard a commotion, someone screaming "The former Queen has killed herself." A few moments later, another shout "Teacher has killed himself." I was thinking of big sister so I didn't even go see the former Queen and went to see Teacher, crying and running there. I saw the Shan Yu running out, not even wearing shoes since he had just laid down to rest. He was barefoot in the snow, and when he saw Teacher's body, his knees almost buckled and fell on the ground. Everyone was so frightened and tried to assist him, but he ordered everyone back. He stayed by Teacher's body for the entire night. Big sister, when the Shan Yu amassed his own army and became a self-appointed Shan Yu, I initially really hated him, hated that he stole Yu Dan's place. But that night, I saw him lonely in that tent. It was snowing outside and we were all cold even by a fire, but he was inside just wearing one thin robe, not moving until sunrise. There was no happiness in his eyes, only sadness and pain. It was cold out, but his heart was even colder. I snuck a peek at him from outside and stopped hating him at that moment. I felt like he must have had a reason to do what he did. And I really believe that he is more suited to be our Shan Yu than Yu Dan was. This is all what I personally saw, I'm not lying to big sister. Later the Shan Yu, despite the protests of the officials, ordered a Han funeral for the Teacher."

An enormous pain ate at my heart and I clutch my chest. I close my eyes and remember hearing the news of Papa's death near the Bang Lian Mountain. It was that painful then, like my heart was being eaten alive, and today that scene comes right back to me.

After Yu Dan left me, I didn't go to the Central Plains like I promised Papa. I hid in the wolf pack, and tried to find a way to get close to Papa. With the help of the wolves, I avoided detection time and again. I thought I could reach Papa and I can take him with me. But as I was about to see Papa, I heard the news of his death.

It had been snowing for three days and three nights already, the snow to my knees. But the snow wouldn't stop falling. It was white, the world was white. Yu Dan was dead, his mother was death, Papa was dead, the Yi Zhi Xie in my heart was dead. I sobbed while running in the snow, but no one appeared. The tears turned into ice on my face and my skin cracked, and my blood mixed with my tears, turning it into red ice tears.

A 12 year old me, running in the snow for one day and one night, finally collapsing in the snow from exhaustion. The snow flakes fall on my face and I look skyward, not moving because I have no strength. I felt like everything is fine, and soon I won't be hurting anymore. Let everything end in this pristine whiteness, without a hint of blood.

Brother Wolf found me and used his claws to brush the snow off me, trying to pull me

away but he was too small then and couldn't move me. So he just crawled on my chest and used his body to shield me, licking me face, my hand, trying to give me warmth. I tell him to leave, otherwise he'll freeze to death, too.

He stared at me, and the way he looked at me was the way Papa looked at me, telling me to survive. I remembered what I promised Papa, that I will survive no matter what happens to me. And I will be happy. Because Papa's only wish for me was that I survive. I look into Brother Wolf's eyes "I was wrong, I want to survive, I must survive." Thank Heavens the wolf pack arrived just in time, and the snow stopped. I was saved by the wolf pack, who used their bodies to keep me warm and the warm blood of their prey to invigorate me.

I suddenly yell out "Don't talk anymore! Mu Da Duo, this is just the past for you, but it's forever a scar on my heart. It was so bloody, and now it has finally become a scab that doesn't bleed anymore. Why is your appearance ripping apart all my scars? Go back! Remember our childhood friendship and pretend that you never saw me. There is no Yu Jin in this world now for a long time. She really has died, died in that big snow storm."

I turn to leave but she grabs my sleeve "Big sister, big sister....."

Before leaving the Xiong Nu – Yu Dan, Ri Chan, Mu Da Duo, and I were the closest of friends. Because of Papa, Yu Dan and I were even closer. When Yu Dan, Ri Chan, and I went out to play, we didn't like to bring Mu Da Duo. She would stare and I would tease her, to call me big sister and I will take her along. She stubbornly refuses because I don't know my age so why should she call me big sister. But she would still tag along behind us. Over time, we became closer because we had the same stubborn wild personality, loving to make mischief. One day I picked my age and had her call me big sister, and that time she agreed. Turned out that she did so because she thought I would do whatever she wanted if she called me big sister.

Her calling me big sister made my heart soften, so I explained "I am doing fine now, and I don't want to go back, and I can't go back." She understood I didn't want to see Yi Zhi Xie, and she promised that she would keep this encounter a secret from him. I grab her hand "Thank you. When are you going back?" She happily grabbed me "Tomorrow, so today everyone was busy and I snuck out to play."

I laugh "I'll show you around, and have the kitchen whip up some Han specialties, as a farewell of sorts." She wonders if we will meet again? Looking back, the past is clear, but we can no longer find the way back. I bitterly say "I hope not. It is impossible for me to see Yi Zhi Xie with a smile. And you've already chosen him. If we meet again, it'll be difficult for you."

Her face turned red and she looked down, leaving me understanding how much she has chosen him "Are you his consort now?"

She shook her head "He treats me so well, so his Queen hates me. He let me tag along on this trip even though no one wanted it. If he asked me to be his consort, I would gladly agree." She snuck a slightly chastened look at me.

I smiled, she's a proud and free Xiong Nu woman, who loves who she loves without shame. "Don't worry about me, regardless of our friendship, if you want to choose Yi Zhi

Xie, that is your life. I just don't want to ever see him again." She asks if I want to kill him? I shake my head "Not at this moment. I struggled a lot, and now things have finally settled down. In the future.....in the future I won't either, as long as we never meet again. Mu Da Duo, it's not me who wants to kill him, it's whether he wants to kill me.

Sometimes you have to make a clean break. Just like he would rather see my Papa commit suicide and feel guilty about it afterwards, but he wouldn't give my Papa a way out."

She tried to argue that he never wanted us dead, never ordered it. I reassure her "What are you worried about? That I would go kill him? He can kill me easily, he is the Xiong Nu's number one warrior, and now the Shan Yu of the entire Xiong Nu kingdom. To kill him would make me the enemy of the entire Xiong Nu. Then my entire life would be mired in this hatred and bitterness. Papa only wanted me to find someone who loves me, who would protect me and make me happy. He didn't want me spending my life seeking vengeance. Mu Da Duo, if one day I see Yi Zhi Xie again, the likelihood is that I will die. You don't need to worry about him. If he finds out I'm still alive, whether I can remain standing here in Chang An is a question."

She promised never to tell anyone I'm alive.

.....

It's another New Year's Eve, and I'm writing on my cloth diary again, about how happy I am that Jiu Ye has called me over, which is the first time he has took the initiative to ask me to go see him. I look into the chest and the clothes have become a big stack by now. When will I be able to convey the thoughts on these clothes to him?

I first go wish Shi Buo and Shi Feng a happy new year and banter with them before heading to the Bamboo Residence. When I arrive I smell plum blossom, which surprises me since Jiu Ye doesn't plant these flowers. On the table is a vase with a white plum blossom, beside it are two wine cups and two chopsticks, plus a bottle of wine warming on a pit. I ask what delicious food he's planning to treat me to, and he tells me to wait and see.

He invites me to sit down next to him, asking "Does your shoulder still hurt?" I give an "ah" before looking quizzically at him, telling him it doesn't hurt anymore while nodding my head. He stopped "Does it hurt or not?" I shake my head "Just a little hurting."

He smiled "Why don't you figure out if it hurts or not, because right now your gestures don't match your words." I chide myself for being useless and explain "It was hurting before but not much anymore."

He tells me "Busy running a business doesn't mean you neglect yourself. It's cold out and everyone is bundled up in layers except for you. No wonder you are constantly complaining about having a sore throat, neck pain, or shoulder ache."

I stare down at the wine cup, with a hidden smile, secretly feeling happy. Shi Feng brings two big bowls of noodles, leading me to ask if that is all he's feeding me. He explains the noodles signifies long life, so he wants to use this bowl of noodles to celebrate my birthday and wish me a long life. I explain it's not my birthday.

He gently says "Everyone should have a special day, and since you don't know your birthday, let's just use today! Last year we met again on this day, so it's a good day. It's

also the first day of the year, so from now on, everyone will be celebrating your birthday with you when they celebrate new year.”

My voice is stuck in my throat and I can’t speak, so I shovel the noodles in my mouth while he sits besides me and watches. The noodles are fragrant and delicious, and when I eat it, it warms me entire body up. Usually all I love are meat, but this is the first time I think noodles are the most delicious food in the world.

The sun sets early in the Winter and soon the room is dark and he lights a lamp. I know I should leave but I am loathe to go. I finally get up the courage to tell him that I am learning a new tune and it sounds better than before.

He takes out his flute and wipes it before handing it to me. I lower my head and play the new tune, which is a song about a woman wondering when she will have a chance to ride in the same boat as the prince, and whether the prince knows how she feels about him.

I practiced this song thousands of time, but when I’m playing I’m so nervous that the tune shakes. When I’m done, I keep my head lowered, holding the flute. I sit there without moving, worried that if I make any move I will break something.

Silence. Dead silence. The air appears to bind together and the flames have stopped flickering, turning dark.

“Even though it’s a foreign to me, the tune is nice. But you didn’t play it well. It’s dark so you should get going!” Jiu Ye lightly responded.

Before I even felt the pain, there was a tear in my heart. A few moments later, that pain radiates outward and slowly seeps into every pore of my body. It hurts so much my body is shaking. I raise my head to him and he meets my eyes before immediately turning away. I stubbornly stare at him but he keeps staring at the vase with the white plum blossom. The unvoiced question of “why” is clearly in my eyes, but he pretends not to notice.

He’s not going to pay you any more attention, so let’s go! At least it’s not completely over, I can leave with a shred of dignity. That is what my heart is telling me, but I stubbornly cling on to the final hope that he will raise his head and look at me one more time.

After a long time, I silently get up and walk outside. When I reach the door, I remember that I am still holding the flute. I am grasping it too tightly and my nails have pierced my palm and it’s bleeding. The blood gets on the flute.

I turn back and put the flute on the table before walking out.

In the dark, I walk aimlessly. How to get back to Luo Yu House I don’t even remember. All my mind can hear are the words “Even though it’s a foreign to me, the tune is nice. But you didn’t play it well” over and over again.

Why? Why? He doesn’t have any feelings for me? But then why does he treat me so well? Why would he wait for me under the lamp when I’m late coming home? Why does he remember every one of my small ailments? Why does he talk to me so gently and tenderly? Why celebrate my birthday with me? Why? So many whys leave my head feeling like it’s going to explode.

New Year’s Eve has every family hanging a red lantern outside their house. The warm red

light illuminates the street and the air smells like fragrant food. Everything is warm and happy, reaching out I can see joy everywhere. But looking down all I can see is my own lonely shadow, swaying in the lantern light.

A few small kids are lighting fire crackers by the side of the street, the crackers letting out a “pop, pop” sound. The kids laugh and are merry, plugging their ears and hiding in the corner to wait for the big explosion.

I walk right past the fire cracker when it suddenly goes off. A bit of the flames land on my skirt, and with a breeze, it catches on fire. The kids realize they did something bad and take off running. I stare numbly as the fire grows bigger, before realizing what is happening. I hurry to use my hands to pat the flames but it doesn’t extinguish. Right when I’m so nervous that I’m about to lay on the ground and roll around to extinguish the flames, suddenly a large cloak is striking my skirts. A few taps and the fire has been extinguished.

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 1 - Chapter 9.2

Chapter 9: Heart Song

“Is your hand hurt?” Huo Qu Bing asks me. I shake my head and put my left hand behind my back.

Huo Qu Bing shakes out his ermine cloak and sighs “What a shame. I just got this a few days ago from the Emperor, and wore it for the first time today.” I had wanted to say I would buy him a new one, but knowing its a reward from the Emperor, I closed my mouth. He gave me a few looks and draped the cloak on me “Even though it’s ruined, it’s still better than your skirt filled with holes left and right.”

I startled “What are you doing on the street?”

He explained “I went to wish uncle and the Princess a happy new year. Why are you on the street by yourself. And from the looks of it, you’ve been here quite a long time. Your hair has flecks of icy frost on the tips.” He used his hands his lightly brush my hair tips and carefully removed the icy frost.

I didn’t answer and looked around, where was I? How did I end up walking around half of Chang An? He studied me carefully “Why are you so forlorn during the New Year? Come with me!”

Before I can object, he’s pulled me on the carriage, and since my energy is spent and right now I don’t care anymore, I let him pull me along. He sees me sitting there in silence and he doesn’t talk either, only the sound of the carriage wheels crunching over the street surround us.

A while later, he says “I know what tune you played. I hummed a few bars and the Emperor overheard me, asking me which girl played “Yue Ren Ge” (The Song of the Yue Person) for me. I stupidly asked why a man couldn’t play it?”

I tempered a smile from the corner of my mouth.

He continued “The Chu and the Yue kingdoms were close but did not speak the same language. When the Chu king passed through Yue on a boat, the Yue girl who was rowing his boat fancied him. But since they couldn’t communicate, she sang this song. The Chu king understood her intentions and happily took her home with him.” explaining a story that happened over a hundred years ago.

Because it was a beautiful encounter that had a happy ending, a lot of girls want to emulate the Yue girl, seeking one’s own happiness. But not everyone succeeds. I don’t

want to hear this story so I cut him off “Where are you taking me?”

He looked at me before smiling brilliantly “Taking you to hear men sing.”

Huo Qu Bing takes me to the Yu Lin Army base outside the city. When Liu Che first assumed the throne, he assembled the Yue Lin Army with the best young men warriors from all regions. He was not allowed to use power, so he pretended to be a useless playboy and had the Yu Lin soldiers split into the Han and the Xiong Nu teams ostensibly to play pretend war games, but really it was to train them. Now the Yu Lin Army is the Han dynasty’s most elite fighting unit. Even though it is the New Year, the base has an aura of danger and fighting essence. Until we enter the mess hall does it feel like the New Year. The door is open and men are inside roasting meat over the fire and drinking merrily.

Huo Qu Bing came from the Yu Lin Army, so of course he is still very close to everyone inside. A well-dressed man saw Huo Qu Bing “You have a great nose, the venison is just done roasting and you show up.” I look over and recognize Li Gan.

Huo Qu Bing just takes me to sit down at a spot that has been opened up for us. No one blinks an eye to see me, as if my presence is perfectly normal, or perhaps its that anything Huo Qu Bing does is perfectly normal. A bowl is placed before me and wine poured.

Huo Qu Bing picks up his bowl and toasts everyone, who laughs and Li Gan says “At least you don’t hem and haw, knowing that you are late so you take your punishment” and pours him another bowl. In moments Huo Qu Bing has downed three bowls of wine.

Everyone stares at me, their faces healthy and warm in the fire, and I sense my heart warm up. I take a deep breath and smile widely, mimicking Huo Qu Bing and toasting everyone, before closing my eyes and downing the bowl of wine.

Everyone hollers and claps and I wipe the residue from my lips. My bowl is filled again but before I can pick it up, Huo Qu Bing picked it up “I brought her here, so the remaining two bowls I will take on her behalf” and gulps the wine down.

Li Gan smiles at me “It’s clear she can’t drink, but she is a good sport. I am impressed. My name is Li Gan.” He gives me a bow and I return it.

Huo Qu Bing and Li Gan clearly have a good relationship. Normally Huo Qu Bing is silent and cold in front of people, with a look of icy arrogance, so people leave him alone. With Li Gan warm and Huo Qu Bing cold, yet their interactions are normal and easygoing with each other.

Li Gan drinks more with Huo Qu Bing and then cuts us some venison. Huo Qu Bing spears a piece with a knife and hands it to me, speaking lowly “Eat some meat to help soak up the alcohol.”

Everyone is tearing into the meat and playing drinking games. The alcohol is hitting my head and all I know is Huo Qu Bing handing me piece after piece of meat and I would eat it. In the drunken haze, I can hear the men singing merrily, and I decide to emulate them and join in the song. In shouting and singing, I feel the sadness in my heart slowly released. This is the first time I understand how the hot blooded young men can be so vibrant and animated.

In the morning, I wake up moaning and Hong Gu stands next to me muttering about why I

drank so much since I don't like to drink.

I hold my throbbing head while Hong Gu feeds me spoonfuls of soup. I ask how I got home, and her mouth has this odd smile. She seductively tells me "You were completely wasted, so how could you come home by yourself? Young master Huo brought you home. I wanted to have someone carry you inside but he just scooped you up and carried you to your room."

I give an "ah" which makes my head hurt like crazy, while Hong Gu explains there is more that will make my head hurt. I weakly ask "What?"

She explains "Young master Huo wanted to leave but you grabbed his sleeve with a deathly grip and wouldn't let him leave. You keep nattering that he had to explain himself, something about why "why are you so good to me? can't you treat me less well. if you treat me not as well perhaps I won't feel so in pain right now". Young master Huo just sat there with you, coaxing you until you fell asleep."

I give a shriek as hazy memories return. I sadly remind myself that I can't get so upset and drink anymore.

I hold out my bandaged hand and confirm Hong Gu wrapped it. She nodded "I did wrap it, but young Huo master Huo watched me and wanted me to cut your nails, His face was dark as he said "so she doesn't hurt herself or others." Pity all the effort I spent on your nails. But seeing the expression on his face, I didn't argue with him." I looked at my nails, which were shorn clean, and I put my hand on my face with a sigh.

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"Why is no one singing?" I'm dangling out of the carriage window gulping down the cold Winter air. Huo Qu Bing wrenches me back inside the carriage with an exasperated expression "You can't drink and your drunken behavior is also a mess?" I laugh and shake off his hands, sticking my head back out the window and singing on top of my lungs. He jerks me inside again, telling me I will have a splitting headache tomorrow if I get drunk and catch a cold.

I push him away and he grabs my hand, right at the place where the cut is. I swallow with gritted teeth and he gently holds my hand "What happened here? Did you get in another sleeve battle with someone?" I laugh "I poked myself." He softly asked "Does it hurt?" I shake my head, pointing to my heart and pouting, half crying and half laughing "It hurts right here." His face is somber and he doesn't answer. I can see the hurt flash through his eyes as he stares at me. Even though I'm completely drunk, it still makes me feel bad and I don't dare to look at him, only averting my eyes quickly.

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Xiao Qian and Xiao Tao love eating egg yolks. Xiao Qian is better, only cooing a few times when I feed him indicating he wants it. Xiao Tao is mischievous to the extreme. Wherever I walk, she follows. She twirls around my skirts and play a game of startling with each step (bu bu jing xin) with me. I wavered between "death by stepping on her" or "fattening her to death", and decide to let her commit suicide.

I look at Xiao Tao and Xiao Qian from time to time, wanting to forget what Jiu Ye said to

me. That “the tune is nice, but you didn’t play it well”, every time I remember it, my heart feels like a knife cutting. It’s been over a month since we had any communication. I sometimes wonder if we’ll never have any ties again?

The moon is low and I stand by the window looking at the stars. Xiao Qian and Xiao Tao stare at me in the dark, letting me know the moonlight is different tonight. I ask myself if I did something wrong, maybe I should never have played that tune. At least then we’ll still have our nightly pigeon communications. I’m too greedy, wanting too much, but it’s impossible for me not to be greedy.

I walk to the edge of the garden and peer down, those Lover’s Vines appeared to have sprouted overnight. They worked hard to struggle through the thick hard soil, looking for a chance to live, seeking sunlight. Last Fall they were underground in the dark, and from the Fall to the Winter until the Spring, over a hundred days has passed.

I gently touch their leaves and my heart flutters. I ask the maid to get a bamboo cover from the gardener, and I carefully place it over the budding flowers to protect it from Xiao Qian and Xiao Tao. It’s so weak it can’t withstand Xiao Tao’s damage.

I walk back and forth outside of the Shi Estate for a long time but am too afraid of vaulting over the wall. I always thought I was a courageous person, but now I realize that for the things which really matter to me, my courage appears to have deserted me.

I’m afraid to enter yet loathe to leave. Feeling conflicted, I jump up on the roof of another house, standing at the tallest point to look at the Bamboo Residence from far away. In the dark night, I can see a light in there. What are you doing under the lamplight?

Tonight there is no moon, and only a few stars dotting the sky. A sound of a rooster crowing indicates it will be morning soon. My heart jerks in sadness, but not for myself. One lone lamp, a long long night, all alone. Why could you not sleep tonight? Why are you all lonely?

There are early risers on the street and I’m afraid to tarry. I hurry and leap off the roof, taking a few steps before I stop. Huo Qu Bing is standing right in the middle of the street. Under the dim morning light, his head is lightly raised as he stares at the roof where I stayed all night. A cold wind blows past and his fluttering sleeves seem to impart a chill as well.

How long has he been standing there?

He lowered his head and looked at me. In his dark eyes, it is hard to distinguish anger or happiness, it’s like he has no emotion. Even if there was thousands of miles and millions of mountains between us, I can never avoid that piercing gaze. I heart constricted and I don’t dare to meet his eyes. I quickly turn away. The two of us stand there, he doesn’t talk, I don’t move. Only silence.

The passerbys all stare at him and then at me, curiosity in their faces. But because Huo Qu Bing has an extraordinary aura, no longer dares linger and quickly scurries past. The sunlight turns from weak to strong and the bright light illuminates the entire ground. He suddenly smiles, and it’s a happy smile. “Staying out all night, what was the matter?” I shift but my throat feels hoarse, making it hard to answer his question. I pick up my feet and run right past him, not daring to turn around.

Under the lamplight, the ink in the ink pad has already dried but I can't find the words. What can I say? From morning until night, I didn't write a single word. Finally I grit my teeth "I spend time with Xiao Tao and Xian Qian eating eggs. I think I ate too much and now I have indigestion. I don't like medicine, so do you have any recommendations?"

I quickly tie it to Xiao Qian before I lose my courage, sending him flying to the Shi Estate. After Xiao Qian leaves, I pace around, deciding to go check out the Lover's Vines. It's growing fast, reminding me that if I work as hard as them, maybe one day I can also see the sunlight? Will he write back to me? Yes? No?

The sound of a bird flapping makes me jump, and Xiao Qian gracefully lands on my shoulder. I was too scared to look at Xiao Qian's leg for a moment, but when I opened my eyes, I see a different cloth note. I untie the note, which is a recommendation on the herbs to brew to help indigestion. I pretended nothing had happened, so he is also pretending nothing had happened. We made one big circle and returned to the same spot. In the note he suggests I can add honey to sweeten it, which will also be good for my throat. He remembered my complaints about bitterness, and that I had a sore throat before. It's like there is something more, but it's always going to be far from me.

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The bursting Spring sun shines unabashedly on the Lover's Vines. When the lights shines on the older leaves, it's like a fish entering the water. While the new leaves are like silk worms in the sun. The old and the new intertwine, twisting in a complicated array around the vine.

"When did you plant a vine patch?" Huo Qu Bing asks from right behind me. His words are casual, like the all night encounter never happened.

I haven't seen him in a month, so suddenly hearing his voice my heart lurches, with some happiness. My body is scared to move, so I stare at the Lover's Vines and pretend nothing ever happened "Can you not suddenly show up right behind me in the future?"

He stands next to me and touches the vines "Even you didn't sense me, clearly my martial arts prowess is indeed not bad. What is this called? Will flowers bloom from it?" I reply "It's called Gold Silver Flowers, and not only will flowers bloom, it'll be beautiful. But it blooms in the Summer, so now is not yet the time." He stood beside me for awhile when he suddenly asked "Do you want to go back to Xi Yu?"

His question was weird so it took me a moment to figure it out "Are you going to Xi Yu?" He replies "Yes, after the Emperor approves, but it's most likely going to happen."

"Oh, I forgot to congratulate you. Heard the Emperor bestowed a new honor on you as the Crown Prince's companion." He laughs at himself "It's nothing worth congratulating, Supposedly it's all my Aunt's connections elevating me, if rumors are to be believed."

I laugh "I didn't hear any rumors, plus I just hear what I want to hear. How old are you this year?"

His eyebrows raise and he teases "Why are you asking my age? I am 18 years old, right at the peak of being a young man. I am handsome and have not yet gotten married. I have an estate and arable land, plus lots of servants. Marrying me is probably a good idea."

I glare at him “Being so young and having so much will surely arouse jealousy. Plus right now you.....”, I stick my tongue out at him and didn’t finish my sentence. He coldly humped “I will let them have nothing to say about me.”

I laugh, knowing that the Great General Wei just returned victorious from yet another tussle with the Xiong Nu. Looks like Huo Qu Bing is finally unable to endure living the life of a privileged young man in Chang An and wants to emulate his uncle to make something of himself.

I respond “Didn’t you familiarize yourself with the Xi Yu territory last time? You are well prepared, plus there is bound to be someone in the army who knows the territory. I doubt I will be of any use.”

He quietly looked at me for a few moments before raising his hands “These days all I hear are whispered criticism behind my back. Other than the Emperor, finally someone else has complimented me. No one can be more familiar with Xi Yu than you. The Xiong Nu know that territory intimately because they constantly travel there.”

I tell him that I currently don’t want to go back to Xi Yu. He says that is fine. I ask him for a favor, to treat any guides they use with kindness. He tells me that as long as they are not conspiring, he treats everyone who works for him well. I bow and thank him. He tells me “From now on I likely have no time to come see you. If you have any need, go straight to my estate to find Housekeeper Chen, who you met in Xi Yu before. He will send someone to let me know.”

I nod my head and look at him “When you return victorious and earn the Emperor’s favor, you have to treat me to a huge feast at Yi Ping Ju.” His face clouds a little “You can go reserve the feast now, so they can start collecting the exotic dish ingredients.”

I laugh and shake my head “Okay, tomorrow I’ll go.” He starts laughing too and striding out, but he stops by the door “Will you come send me off when I set off to war?” I tease him “Who am I to you, and where would a place be reserved for me to stand?”

He just stares at me without speaking, so I ask “When are you setting off?” He smiled “Another month.” So I smile and tell him we’ll see each other in a month’s time then.

He nods and briskly walks away. Under the Spring sun, his majestic figure slowly grows distant. Behind him the ground shines with the brilliant sunlight.

The leaves of the Lover’s Vines are slowly swaying in the wind. I squint as I looked up at the sky. On a beautiful March day, the trees are green, the flowers are red, and we are standing right at the peak of youth.

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 1 - Chapter 10

Chapter 10: Assassination

I knock on the door, asking where Jiu Ye is? Xiao Feng tells me Jiu Ye is arranging his books in the study, and no one is allowed inside so I should wait outside for him. I ignore him and walk towards the study, which is the first time I've been there despite being familiar with the Bamboo Residence. The study is enormous and filled with shelves of books. Jiu Ye is arranging books, so I purposely walk loudly. He hears me and smiles, inviting me inside. He tells me to sit, he'll be done soon. I make a face at Xiao Feng.

I curiously look at the books, asking if he's read it all. He answers that he has flipped through most of them. I assess all the books, ranging from philosophy texts to tactical manuals. I see another shelf with only one book, and then some sheafs of paper. I see the paper is all covered with Jiu Ye's handwriting, and it discusses war strategy for conquering or protecting a city, how the philosopher Mo Zi lamented how the strong countries attacked the weak, and some more writing on how make weapons and how to keep warm in winter.

Another shelf has only medical journals. One book, with Jiu Ye's note on the side, is an anatomy text that also discusses male-female relations. My face flames and I drop the book, wondering why he's reading it. He asks me if I read it, and I tell him with a red face that I glanced at it before but burned it afterwards. He looks confused and I realize he's pointing to another book I am holding, which is in a writing I can't read. I am so embarrassed I want to crawl into a hole. I try to explain I don't understand this but wanted to study it because I was curious. I'm nervous and babbling, and I can tell he's trying to control his laughter. He finally gives up and leans back on his wheelchair and starts to guffaw.

My embarrassment gives way to happiness at hearing his laugh, and he's just so amused at seeing how his casual question caused me to lose my famous cool. I confirm that those books are not in the Han language. He nods, and asks why I'm not probing any further. I tell him "You never probed into my life with the wolves. Why I was born in the Xi Yu but spoke perfect Han, but couldn't speak any of the Xi Yu languages. Everyone has things that are hard to explain. If you want to tell me one day, I will gladly sit besides you and listen. If you don't want to tell me, I won't probe. Someone once told me that he only knows the me in his eyes. I also feel the same way, I only know the you in my eyes."

He answers that he doesn't even know where to start, so I assure him that I will always be on his side. He asks why I'm here and I explain I had the day free and wanted to come see

him....and Xiao Feng. I suddenly notice a intricate crutch standing against the wall. Does he use it? I've never seen him on crutches before.

As we walk out of the study, the door automatically closes and doesn't open again, showing that the contraptions are not just for his ease of use, but designed by him to control who can access places within the Bamboo Residence. He explains that he's heading out in a bit so I excuse myself. Instead he invites me along, to go visit some farms outside the city, where I can try some fresh fruit straight from the trees. I happily nod.

Shi Buo drives the carriage himself and is told I'm not going back to Luo Yu Fan and will instead be coming along to visit the farm. Shi Buo appears to want to say something but doesn't, just getting the carriage on the road. As the carriage enters the woods, there is suddenly the sound of horse hooves chasing us. I instinctively grab my silk sash with the gold bells on the ends. Jiu Ye just smiles and shakes his head, indicating that I needn't worry.

The horses and riders pass us by but Shi Buo knows they are just pretending. His horse whip comes down and their horses topple, sending the two men flying to the ground. They immediately attack Shi Buo but are quickly disarmed. The two men notice Shi Buo's custom made horse whip and their expression changes from rage to stunned shock. They start talking to Shi Buo and kneeling before him. Shi Buo asks the kneeling man a question, which causes Jiu Ye's smile to disappear. He orders the man to repeat what he just said in Han for me.

The man quickly explains "We were not following the Shi Estate carriage, and had no intention of harming anyone on the Shi Estate. We were hired to track the head of Luo Yu House and assassinate her." He kept bowing to Shi Buo "We really didn't know you are from the Shi Estate, and that the young lady is friends with the Big Boss. If we knew, an entire mountain of gold and we would not accepted this assignment."

I ask in shock "Who hired you?" The man refuses to answer, abiding by the code of the assassins not to reveal their client. Shi Buo explains I will never get the answer from them. I tell Shi Buo to let them go, and he does after Jiu Ye also tells him to do so. The two men promise to never divulge what happened here today, swearing an oath that I know is the most deadly oath for any traveler in the Gobi Desert.

When walking away, one man runs back and kneels tearfully in front of Jiu Ye "I did not know this young lady is the young master's person. I almost betrayed the grace you bestowed. I am no better than a pig or a dog" and tries to kill himself. Jiu Ye uses his bow to shoot the sword out of the man's hand and tells him that he mistook Jiu Ye for someone else. Jiu Ye never bestowed any grace on him before.

I'm still stuck on the sentence "this young lady is the young master's person" and suddenly think these two guys are not bad at all. The two men know they did not make a mistake, since Shi Buo is personally guarding Jiu Ye. They discuss how their entire family has been graced by Jiu Ye's benefaction and they continue to bow until their foreheads are bloody. I tell them to scram if they feel gratitude and not try to kill themselves, leaving us with two corpses to take care of. And in a steely voice, I tell them both they made a mistake in identifying Jiu Ye, and they finally get my drift and quickly promise to return to Xi Yu and never speak of today ever again.

Continuing on our way, I wonder who hired these assassins, and did Mu Da Duo reveal I was alive. Was my life going to be in danger again? I tell Jiu Ye that I haven't made any enemies in Xi Yu, and the only person who could do this can easily send his own men to kill me, so why use assassins. Shi Buo offers to find out more about this, but I tell him it's not necessary. If its someone else I can handle it, if its that person, there is nothing I can do.

We arrive at the farm, which is vast and lifts my spirits, reminding me that my life is within my own control. No one can try and take it away from me. I can see Shi Buo is intending something, and I pull him aside to remind him to let those two assassins go as per Jiu Ye's orders. I run back to the farm and happily try to identify all the vegetables growing in the field. Jiu Ye finishes his meeting and joins me, teasing that I look like a farm girl.

I walk with Jiu Ye along the field, the sun slowly setting, and the mood reminds me of the saying that "men farm and women sew", and how people find happiness in living a simple life.

I sneak a peek at Jiu Ye, and to my surprise, he's also looking at me. Our eyes meet and his face suddenly reddens, and he quickly turns away. It's the first time I've seen him red-faced and stare at him, His wheelchair moves faster and finally he asks me "What are you looking at." I tease him "Looking at you!" but when I say this his is just speechless, leaving me berating myself for making a mess of the situation again. He finally laughs and shakes his head "You really were raised in Xi Yu," and I respond "I'm already much better, back then I would say anything I wanted."

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After I get home, I take out a cloth and write down my thoughts. I see that Jiu Ye enjoys reading the scholars who extol peace for the common people over nationalistic expansion. Especially Mo Zi, who spent his life for the people, and trying to convince the smaller countries to band together to oppose the hegemonies. So does Jiu Ye want to oppose the Han dynasty? I can see that he's conflicted and torn, and that his background is clearly not as simple it appears on the surface.

I tell Hong Gu to hire m a teacher on the old scholars, especially Mo Zi, for me to learn. The teacher won't come teach at the dancing house so I go and listen to his lecture, leaving me with much food for thought. When I return, Hong Gu excitedly tells me that the Princess sent lots of reward today because Li.....has become Consort Li. Soon Consort Li might be sending gifts as well.

Hong Gu sighs that Li Yan is truly something, having only entered the Palace last Fall and already she's become Consort Li, second only to Empress Wei. My attention is caught by the Lover's Vines, where tiny white flowers are sprouting. I clap my forehead and ask if the Emperor has dispatched an army recently. Hong Gu looks confused, which gives me relief that the army likely hasn't left yet for war. I tell Hong Gu to catalogue all the gifts and keep only what she likes, the rest will be sold for a good price now before one day we are in need of money and sell it for cheap.

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 1 - Chapter 11

Chapter 11: Handkerchief Delivery

The city of Xu Fang is one of the Emperor's tributaries at the border, so every time the Xiong Nu attacks Xu Fang, the entire Chang An city goes on high alert.

When Emperor Wu of Han first ascended the throne, he vowed to eliminate this enemy. The Great General Wei was sent out and he managed to battle two of the Xiong's Nu's generals and regain valuable territory along the River South region. Liu Che ordered people moved to that region and there he built Xu Fang city.

To protect the River South region, Liu Che once again sends his generals out. For this expedition, other than the Great General Wei leading the pack, General Gong Xun Che takes the left flank, General Gong Xun He takes the right flank, General Zhao Xin takes the first attack, and General Li Guang (Li Gan's father) heads back the back support.

The Great General Wei is given 60,000 troops for this mission to attack the Xiong Nu. Huo Qu Bing is named as a Captain and leads 800 of the finest Yu Lin Army warriors to head out to battle with his two uncles, the Great General Wei and General Gong Xun He.

I sit on the top of a big tree staring at the road. Under the sunlight the armor glistens and makes my eyes a little glazed over. Huo Qu Bing, wearing an all black armor, rides a horse past, heading for the city gates. Compared to when he wore the wide sleeved robes, dressed in battle gear takes away some of his carefree nature and adds some dashing valor. His striking aura is palpable.

I haven't seen him in a month and his skin is almost the color of bronze. Looks like he was under the sun everyday. Even from a distance, I can still sense the tightly bound danger radiating from him. Suddenly I feel like he's a lot like my own species. Like Brother Wolf, the shiniest beacon in the pack. Whenever the wolves are about to attack, he will just silently and surely look straight ahead, never wavering.

He occasionally looks on the sides of the streets. I straighten myself and stand on the biggest branch to look at him. He finally meets my eyes and I smile and wave at him, pointing towards Yi Ping Ju's direction, He doesn't shift on the horse or slow down, his cold gaze not even changing in the slightest. When our eyes met his horse is already rushing past me. I turn my head and watch as his figure disappears in a trail of dust.

I run into Shi Sheng Xing and Shi Feng as they are headed out of the city. Xiao Feng calls out to me and lets me know that Jiu Ye has sent someone to look for me.

There is a gentle breeze blowing through the Bamboo Residence, and Jiu Ye is sting there

feeding pigeons when I walk in. The pigeons scatter and the sudden movement of white only leaves me noticing the stillness of his blue robe. I ask him why he is looking for me, and he hesitates so I tell him to always be frank with me. He asks to borrow money from me, and normally he ought to explain why, but he can't tell me anything. If the business goes well, he can repay me next year with interest. I gladly lend him the money.

He amount he asks for makes me suck in my breath. He tells me to lend him what I have, and I say I can get the entire amount. I own half the dancing houses in Chang An now, and even though business is slow, Luo Yu House is still doing well since everyone knows Li Yan came from our house before entering the Palace. He knows it's still not easy to get this money now, but I tell him to just wait and see,

When I get back to Luo Yu House it is dinner time, and after going through the accounts with Hong Gu many times, all I can get is 1/3rd what he needs. She asks why I need the money for but I won't tell her anything other than it's to do business and make more money.

I ask about the gifts the Princess sent, and then teasingly mutter why Consort Li hasn't come by to thank us for helping her. Hong Gu laughs at me and calls me a money hungry girl, heading off to sleep. I stop her, wanting to write her a promissory note before take this money. She startles, telling me the money is all mine, but I say it's half hers. She reminds me that I give her things constantly and always lets her pick the pretty baubles she likes first,

I counter that she runs all the daily operations and I never need to worry about the businesses. She worked hard to get Consort Li into the Palace, so of course half of the gifts from the Princess is hers. She thinks anyone can run the house, but I counter that its hard to find someone as capable as she is. I write the promissory note and shove it in her hand.

I take out a cloth and write "Today you asked me to borrow money, which made me very happy. You can borrow money from anywhere in Chang An but you asked me, so that means you trust me. I know you ought to easily have this money based on how big the Shi Enterprises are, so where did you spend all the money these years? During the recent wars, common people are caught in the cross hairs and starving. Plus there was a cold frost in Xi Yu the likes which have not been seen in a hundred years, wiping out crop after crop. Do you want the money to help the Xi Yu people? If that is true, then I will use everything I own, and do everything I can, to assist you....."

I think to myself, it looks like my original assumption was correct, Li Yan and Jiu Ye have the same goal in mind. Li Yan wants to stop the westward expansion of the Han Empire from within the Palace, while Jiu Ye wants to protect the kingdoms of the Western territories. Looks like I did the right thing by helping Li Yan.

.....

In the courtyard a woman sits and coos with her parakeet, both of them forever locked in a cage, keeping each other company. In the recesses of this Palace back residence (called Ho Gong, which is where the Emperor's women live), under the curtains, how many women's tears and youth have been locked away? Compared to the Han Emperor's ladies, the Xiong Nu wives are somewhat happier. Even if they are lonely, they can ride horses under

the blue sky. The women here can only quietly sit in the courtyard.

Princess Yangping looks at me and notes that even having a parakeet as company is not bad. She thinks I'm smart enough at least..... One we step inside the residence, I give the Princess a look assuring her that I will be cautious. Li Yan smiles and stands up, welcoming the Princess to sit down. Li Yan waves me in from outside the curtain and then sends her maid away. After chatting, the Princess heads to go meet the Empress, leaving me to chat with Li Yan.

After the Princess leaves, Li Yan asks why I wanted to see her personally, did she not send enough gifts and money already? I laugh and tease that money is naturally something where one can never have enough. She bops me on the forehead and smiles at me. I look at her carefully, she is dressed extravagantly but still elegant. Perhaps it is because she is already married, but her face has some shades of sultry despite dressed in simple layers. She sees me staring at her and blushes, asking if I saw anything? I laugh "Initially I didn't see anything, but since you mentioned it, I think I do now." She reaches out and touches her face "You must've been sneaking those books, shame on you!"

Her eyes are filled with embarrassment and a little bit of temper, which makes her look even more beautiful, and I just stare. "What a country-toppling beauty. The Emperor is lucky to have you. Even when he is stressed, seeing you will surely make him smile." She asks what exactly I want, and I hand over a handkerchief with the Li character embroidered on it. She recognizes it as being identical to her old one, which she thought was lost awhile ago. I explain I burned the old one already and made a new one for her.

I continue "The original handkerchief was found by third young master Li and he was anxious to find the owner of it, so I decided to burn it to avoid problems." She asks "Li Gan?" I ask if there is another third young master Li in Chang An?

She asks why I brought a new one if I burned the old one. I tell her to burn this one if she wants. We sit in silence, and then she asks if I knew about the deadly frost this Winter in Xi Yu? I've heard, and there has been a huge influx of dancers from the Xi Yu. Now, the price of watching a dancing show can buy the virginity of one of the dancers, that is how desperate they are.

She coldly remarks how this will cause all the dancing houses to engage in a price war until these girls will be worth nothing. I tell Li Yan that I have ordered none of my dancing houses to lower their prices or wages, and she knows I am helping these girls in the only way I can. I laugh that it's for my own gain, since a price war will mean that the prices will stay low for a long time. She sighs, chiding me for refusing to accept a compliment.

I tell her that despite growing up in Xi Yu, I don't have any emotional ties to there, so I don't have a strong desire to help Xi Yu. Everything I do is for the business of the dancing houses. She wishes I had the same feelings as her but knows these things cannot be forced. She is just glad I am not standing in her way. She asks about business and I say it is good thank to her. She asks about her brothers, since she doesn't have a chance to see them often. I say her second brother is now running with a pack of rich young masters in the city. She sighs that he's always been the spoiled and pampered one in the family, and asks me to talk to him for her so that he doesn't get into any trouble.

I stand up and say that I don't want to manage her two brothers for her, and she tells me I

ought to care if not because Li Yan Nian composed all these tunes for the dancing house. As I head out I suddenly run back inside, informing her that I am so lucky that the first time in the Palace I actually managed to see the Emperor, who is walking with the Princess in the distance.

She smiles and tells me to wait with her to welcome the Emperor, the Princess will surely speak well of me.

.....

Xiao Qian lands on the window sill and I remove the cloth, chiding him for needing to go on a diet soon or else he'll become a small chicken. In the note, Jiu Ye asks me where I learned some new Xi Yu phrases, and then reminds me the two pigeons need to go on a diet or else they will be ashamed to call themselves pigeons. I laugh out loud.

I take a cloth and write "I'm laying on the window and talking to you right now. I'm guessing you are reading a book under the lamplight. When I raise my head I see the stars above, and the flowers of the Lover's Vines are blooming. The white ones are like jade while the yellow ones are like gold, the fragrance blanketing the air. I can smell it even when I'm going to sleep at night. I already plucked some to dry in the bamboo basket, so that when Fall comes and the flowers wilt, I can still smell the dried flowers. I went to the Palace today, after much deliberation. The Li family is a prominent one in the Han court, different than the Great General Wei's lowly birth, the current General Li Guang is descend from a line of high Han court officials. I gave Li Yan the handkerchief, knowing that she will surely not be able to resist aligning with this prominent family, knowing that Li Gan can be of use to her. I know Li Gan's adoration of her will only become a tool for her to use. But I can't worry about that anymore. I only want to do what can help you. I only want to see you happy. Once the Han dynasty stops attacking the various Xi Yu territories, will the worry in your brows ease? Perhaps then you can genuinely be happy and do what you want to do, and stop forcing yourself....."

I put this cloth in the chest with a smile.

"The days pass so fast, and in a blink of an eye, it's already the end of Summer. The flowers in the Lover's Vines are growing sparse. Today I suddenly understood that the Lover's Vines do represent a pair of lovers. A pair of lovers who go through a lot and finally have happiness. One flower opens first, but then waits for the other flower to open. Isn't that like a pair of lovers who hasn't met before. When the opened flower turns yellow is when the other flower opens. One white and one yellow, when they meet and dance. When one flower wilts the other continues to valiantly bloom, to not waste the chance given. Their blooming reminds the person viewing the flower that there was once another flower blooming besides it. Once it disappears into the wind, I believe that in the wind, the other flower waits there, unseen and silently, for it to be reunited....."

.....

"It is already Fall and the rain comes down. A person feels a bit lazy, constantly thinking about random things. Heard the Princess mention that Li Yan is worried about why she has not yet conceived. Her worry isn't just a desire to become a mother, it is that without a child, her plan cannot begin. The position of the Crown Prince remains empty, so if she can bear a boy, one day she can fight for the throne for him. No matter how much love a

woman receives, the only way to protect her position down the line is only through her child.”

Seeing Li Yan, in addition to admiration, I am also scared of this woman. How strong must her hate and love be, for a woman to gamble on her entire life and the life of her child in a deadly battle of intrigue. I ask myself, and there is no way I can do it. If I had a child, I will never, ever, let the child get embroiled in a battle. I will teach the child the same things Papa taught me so that the child learns how to strategize, but I want to child to grow up happy and safe. Strategic intelligence is just something to be used to protect oneself.

My face starts to heat up. I haven’t gotten married yet and already I’m thinking about my child’s future. I wonder if I will ever have a child in my life? After thinking for some time, I don’t have an answer. But when i look outside and see the Lover’s Vines, which only have green remaining on them, I think I understand. Not every bloom will flower, but to welcome the sunlight and bid farewell to the moonlight, playing with the wind and battling with the rain, that is living a full life. I don’t think they will have any regrets.....

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 1 - Chapter 12

Chapter 12: Invitation

The Fall arrives and the Han's battle with the Xiong Nu ends. Even though the army commanded by the Great General Wei captured or killed tens of thousands of Xiong Nu, one of his subordinates the General Zhao Xin met the army led by the Shan Yu himself in battle, and somehow Yi Zhi Xie was able to convince Zhao Xin to switch sides.

When the news reaches Chang Ah, Emperor Wu of Han orders Zhao Xin's entire family and estate to be killed. When the special army arrives, they discover Zhao Xin's two young sons have somehow vanished. The Emperor is livid, until another new arrives that makes him thrilled, Huo Qu Bing, in an attitude like he doesn't care and refusing to follow battle protocol, privately leads 800 of his hot-blooded Yu Lin Army soldiers into battle against direct orders to stay put.

He succeeds in sneaking onto the Xiong Nu army base, and he manages to kill the Prime Minister, the Finance Minister, and a bevy of officials ranking from the Shan Yu's grandfather's generation. His troops captures the Shan Yu's uncle Luo Gu Bi and kills two thousand and twenty eight soldiers. Huo Qu Bing's private attack expedition emerged victorious despite having smaller numbers, and he personally managed to capture or kill four of the top officials in the Xiong Nu.

At a time when both sides suffered tremendous losses, and a Han general switches sides to the Xiong Nu, Huo Qu Bing's prowess on the battlefield and his success only appears even more stunning. The Emperor crowns him as a Grand Duke and gives him wealth to equal over a thousand households. For the Great General Wei who commanded this entire army, battling to a draw with the Xiong Nu in this tussle, the Emperor does not cast blame or reward.

When I hear about all this, it makes me even more confused. If Yi Zhi Xie can somehow smuggle Zhao Xin's two young sons out of Chang An under the Emperor's nose, then he can kill me anytime, why even hire assassins?

Huo Qu Bing dumbly stares into Yi Ping Ju. From top to bottom, all three floors are filled with beautiful young girls, chattering away and lively. His face is somber while I stand next to him and giggle.

He sudden turns and jumps back into the carriage and pulls me inside while I holler "Hey, hey, Grand Duke, you are supposed to be treating me to a meal at Yi Ping Ju."

He huffs in annoyance "I wanted to treat you, not every single girl in your dancing

houses.”

I laughed “I always wanted to have the girls gather for a meal to strength their ties. But if the meal is too cheap people will laugh at me, but if the meal is too expensive my wallet will hurt. Since you agreed to treat, I thought why not invite all the girls, so I had Yi Ping Ju help organize it. Why are you so stingy? You went out for a twirl and came back a Grand Duke. Treating a few hundred of us to a meal is something you can easily afford.”

“Went out for a twirl? What an interesting way to downplay it. Next time you join me for the twirl and I’ll split everything I’m rewarded with you in half” he says as he continues to stare at me.

I avert his eyes and look outside with a smile “Where are we going? Knowing we were going out to eat, I purposely didn’t eat much for lunch. And even though we are not eating at Yi Ping Ju, you still have to pay that bill.”

He has a small smile and quietly sits there looking at me, not saying he’ll pay for it or not pay for it. After being apart for over a month, he appears the same as before, yet he appears to have changed as well. My heart feels this indescribable confusion. I subconsciously shrink back into my seat and press myself into the seat back.

When the carriage stops, he jumps off with an elegant flourish, turning around to assist me. I laugh and raise my chin, pushing his hand away. I push off the seat and with a kick on the roof, somersault out of the carriage. I turn in the air, my skirts swirling, and land with a flourish in front of him. I look at him with a pleased expression and he smiles back “You’re so competitive, but that was very pretty.”

The driver left and I looked around at the surroundings. We were in a quiet lane with tall walls on both sides. I suspiciously asked “Where is this place? What are you planning?”

He replied “Climb the wall and go inside.” I stared wide eyed at him “Looking at the height of this wall, this is no ordinary estate. It’s alright if I get captured, but you’re a Grand Duke now.” He countered “Then it’ll depend on how good you are. With the wall this high, I can’t climb over without some assistance.”

Feeling curious, and a bit playful, plus some excitement, I still acted all annoyed in front of him“What bad luck, having to go through so much trouble just for a meal.” My hands went to the silk sash I normally wore around my waist, which had gold balls attached to one end. It looks decorative, but has another purpose. My hand flew forward and the sash cut a golden streak in the air, twisting around to catch a branch on the other side the wall.

Huo Qu Bing used the sash and climbed two steps before he flipped himself and landed on the tree. I did as well, and took the sash off the branch and put it around my wrist. My hand held another branch as I stood up and looked around the yard.

He muffled his laughter “I had thought you enjoyed being a thief.”

I replied “No one in Chang An would dare have ideas when it comes to these rich and powerful people. I’m not going to worry about my insignificant life and just have fun now. If something happens, I’ll just say you ordered me. And if you were captured, that would be even more amusing.”

Just as I jump off the tree with Huo Qu Bing, a few large black dogs immediately charge

us. I throw my sash at their heads, hoping to knock them out with the gold balls. Huo Qu Bing grabs me from behind and pulls me into his embrace. With one arm around my waist, his other arm pulls the sash and decrease the strength of the gold balls.

Before I could think clearly, the dogs have arrived at our feet, all of them twirling around our legs and wagging their tails at Huo Qu Bing. I angrily asked “Don’t tell me this is your own estate.”

His arm around my waist doesn’t loosen, and instead he presses up close to me, resting his chin on the top of my head. He murmured in a low voice “Unfortunately, you have guessed correctly.”

I struggle to free myself, but before I can get free, the soft warmth of his breath grazes my skin, making it tingly. His body has a male fresh scent completely different than a woman’s smell of lotions and makeup. He’s like the oak tree and sunlight. His smell so near my nose makes me feel like I almost can’t breath. My body feels weak and my head is a little cloudy, leaving me unable to think of what move I wanted to make.

In my nervousness I thought about just throwing the gold balls at his head to free myself, but then I worried that I might bash his head in. Before I can decide, he suddenly releases me like nothing just happened. He pulls my hand so that we kneel down before the dogs as he talks to them “Get familiar with this smell, so you guys don’t accidentally hurt my person.”

I have no choice but to allow the dogs to sniff me all around, while I scoff “It’s just a few dogs, what a joke! How dare you look down on us wolves.”

He patted their heads “If I wasn’t here, they would have attacked you the moment your feet touched the ground, and called for their companions. Isn’t attacking in large numbers one of your wolf tricks? And don’t forget about the people who would have swiftly followed.”

I give a hump and toss off his hand “Why would I ever have a reason to sneak into your estate. There will never be a reason for me to tussle with them.”

He gives a whistle and the dogs run off. He stands up and brushes his hands clean and looks at me with a smile and teases “It looks like you enjoy jumping over walls and onto roofs. Who knows if one day you will miss me and come here to see me. So I’m taking you here to familiarize you with the route. In case you alert people, and with your thin skin, you may be afraid to come back again.”

My face is red and I tie the sash around my waist “Where is the front door? I’m leaving.”

He ignored me and walked ahead “I brought back a royal chef from the Ruo Yi kingdom, a master at roasting meat. A sheep from the plains who has been running from the Spring until the Fall, with meat that is perfectly tender. Paired with side dishes from other Xi Yu territories, eating the meat when it’s fresh of the pit, that taste is so good it’s impossible to describe.”

I swallowed and my feet started to follow him. The Han people don’t eat roast meats, preferring to braise. When I get desperate I would start a fire and roast my own meat, but my culinary skill is so that only the wolves likely find acceptable.

I kneel before the fire pit, with my hands propping up my chin, staring at the chef. A boy no older than sixteen, whether it's the fire or my staring, his face gets redder and redder.

Huo Qu Bing pulls me off the ground in one fell swoop "If you keep staring, we'll be eating minced meat." I take a deep sniff of the air and reluctantly follow him back to the table.

The chef brings the meat to the table and I immediately shove a big piece in my mouth. After eating a few pieces, Huo Qu Bing asks me "While I was away, what did you do in Chang An?"

"Not much, just running the business. Oh wait, I went into the Palace and met the Emperor....."

Before I finished talking, he hit me on the head and growled "What insanity possessed you to enter the Palace to meet the Emperor?"

I hold my head and glare at him "Who says you can tell me what to do? I can do whatever I want!"

He glared at me back for a few moments before asking "Did that hurt your head?"

My eyes widen "Why don't you let me hit you on your head and you can see!"

Who knew he would actually stick his head out in front of me. I laughingly push his head away "If I hit it, my hand would hurt more!"

His face is solemn and he asks he "What did the Emperor say?"

I cocked my head and thought "Complimented me a bit, for my sudden appearance and scaring away the desert thieves. He rewarded me a few items, and with a smile told me I can go visit Consort Li in the Palace in the future to keep her company."

"What was your impression of the Emperor?" I thought a bit and shook my head, so he said "What's with the head shaking? You don't have any impression?"

I respond "That's not possible, especially for such a person! It's just too complicated that I can't explain. His age is around 37 years old but he looks like he's barely 30. His eyes make him seem like he's 40, but his energy is like a 20 year old. He was very warm in speaking to me, but I know that is just one of thousands of ways he can talk to people. There is a complicated nature within him. He doesn't care about position and background, not caring about Consort Li's low birth, so he was very considerate towards me. But he still resides higher than anyone, and no one dares to offend him. I was kneeling the entire time."

He coldly huffed "You could have been outside (the Palace), but you deliberately chose to go inside and kneel. Serves you right!"

I can see he's not happy so I reassure her "Don't worry, Consort Li was besides me the entire time."

He shook his head "One can get bored looking at peonies and want to pluck some dog tail grass to play with one of these days."

I angrily laugh "So I'm a dog tail grass, that would make you....." I don't finish my

sentence.

“Make me what? What am I?”

I humphed at him and ignored him to eat my meat. My mind was filled with images of Li Yan smiling at the Emperor that day. The Emperor and the Princess already knew I was friends with Huo Qu Bing, but it was the first time Li Yan has heard of this. When she heard this, I can see that underneath her smiling face is concern and worry.

Huo Qu Bing asked “What are you thinking about” and I quickly answer “Li Yan” to avoid him asking more.

I finish eating and wash my hands in the water, wiping it with a cloth. I think back to how the scholar officials have been discussing how Ning Che suggested to the Great General Wei to give a portion of his reward from the battle to Consort Li. When the Emperor heard of this, he gave Ning Che a higher position, which show how much he care for Consort Li.

I softly say “Having the Great General Wei give a portion of his reward to Consort Li is not her desire, it’s due to people wanting to remain in the Emperor’s good graces.” He coldly laughed “Do I care about that money? I despise Ning Che for suggesting that the Great General’s successes are solely for the Empress. Perhaps early on it was because of my aunt that my uncle was greatly used. But over the years, his multiple successful expeditions to the Xiong Nu was earned by himself. But those scholars refuse to give us any credit. Xi Ma Qian called me ill-mannered and rude, but when I see these useless scholars, I honestly don’t know what to say to them other than look at the sky.”

I see his exasperation and laugh “So there are people who leave you annoyed. I thought you weren’t scared of anyone. Who cares what they say? Those scholars have no power so they can talk more freely in front of the Emperor. But the Great General holds all the army control in the Empire, so he has to be extra careful when speaking to the Emperor.”

He sighed and didn’t answer. Seeing his furrowed brows, I felt bad and tugged on his sleeve. I tease “Xi Ma Qian is a mild-mannered gentleman. Your behavior really doesn’t merit that he compliment you.”

He looked at my hand “Why are you all touchy feely with me, that is not the behavior of a gently bred lady. But.....” and he tried to grab my hand “I like it.”

I angrily slap his hand away and he withdraws it with a smile. But his eyes are bright and his face is alive, which makes me relieved, and I smile back at him.

We haven’t see anyone but we hear their footsteps first. A voice says “What fragrant roast meat, the traditional Xi Yu roasting method. Qu Bing sure knows how to enjoy himself.” I quickly stand up but he shakes his head “Don’t worry, it’s my uncle.”

I knew I shouldn’t have come and angrily ask “Your uncle? General Wei and the Emperor are also your uncles. Which one is this? General Gong Xun He?”

Huo Qu Bing nodded and stood up to welcome them as Gong Xun He and Gong Xun Aou walk in. When they see me behind Huo Qu Bing, a look of shock passes through their faces but it was so quickly it barely registered. I knew how crafty they are.

When I returned home that night, I wasn’t terribly happy or sad. I didn’t want to let

random people affect my mood, though I was a bit more alert inside.

When Gong Xun He saw the way I held my knife and cut my head, he looked flabbergasted and asked me if I lived with the Xiong Nu before. I was so nervous that I lied that I didn't. Gong Xun He was himself a Xiong Nu person, so he immediately recognized how I held the knife. He didn't ask any further but it was clear he knew I lied to him. His eyed me coldly after that. I wished I had casually answered that I lived there with the nomads on the plains. But my hesitation to reveal the truth will only make Gong Xun He suspect me. And Gong Xun Aou seems to dislike me even more, ignoring me the entire time.

Huo Qu Bing can sense their attitude but doesn't say anything. He was even more solicitous towards me. He took my knife and personally cut the meat before placing it before me. In the past, Huo Qu Bing has only been served by others, he has never served another. Gong Xun He and Gong Xun Aou are both stunned. When the arrogant Gong Xun Aou saw the way Huo Qu Bing treated me, he had no choice but to hide his dislike and treat me with more courtesy.

.....

These past few days, when meal time arrives, I remember the delicious roasted lamb and that talented chef. The food on the table before me pales and looks tasteless. If Huo Qu Bing knew that, after I ate his delicious food, I was so greedy that I've been plotting ways to steal his chef, he'll probably call me a ravenous greedy little wolf.

I was still daydreaming about my food when a girl comes in crying "Madam, please come, third master Li has arrived to tear down our dancing house. I couldn't stop him and he ripped my dress."

I laugh and tell her to wipe her nose "Don't cry, I'll buy you a new outfit." She sniffled and asked to pick out her color and I say fine, asking her to explain about what happened. She got scared "We don't know either. Normally third master Li is gentle and refined, always polite to everyone. We always enjoy his visits. But today he stormed inside and demanded to see Hong Gu, and then started throwing things left and right. We tried to stop him but he pushed us aside. He looked like he wanted to punch someone so we all ran away. He's probably still throwing things right now."

Hong Gu, looking ragged, walks in and I laugh at her. She huffs at me "Laugh all you want, if he keeps destroying things, we'll all be out on the street tonight." I run outside after her "Don't be upset. If he wants to throw a fit, we can't stop him. He has martial arts and we can't win in a fight. Let him throw things until he gets tired and stops." I hand her a mirror and she yelps when she sees the state of her disarray.

She wails "I have never been so mistreated as today. Letting a young man yell and rail at me, calling me an evil cruel witch. He asked about the handkerchief and I told her that the owner of this dancing house did investigate and told me which girl the handkerchief belonged to. He demanded to see you but I can see the rage in his eyes so I lied that you went out. Did Li Gan find out the handkerchief belonged to Li Yan? How did he find out? I thought this was only between you and me? And didn't you burn that handkerchief already?"

“I don’t know” as I lied to Hong Gu and fixed her hair. “From now on, you need to forget about the handkerchief and pretend it never happened. Never mention it again.” She quieted and answered “I’ve already forgotten.”

A maid come in bearing hot water and looking worried “Third master Li is still throwing things!” I laugh and tell Hong Gu not to worry “Whatever he destroys, I’ll make him pay for it.” She looked alarmed “How do you dare ask him? If he saw you, he’d probably toss you instead.”

I laugh “Why would I ask him? A son’s mistake is for a father to rectify. I’ll ask General Li Guang, an honorable man, who would pay for it. If we deliver the bill to his estate, how could he not pay us?”

She thought for a moment and smiled “Li Gan’s two older brothers have already died young and General Li Guang was so saddened by it. Li Gan is especially filial towards his father and has never dared disobey his father. If General Li heard about this, no matter how angry Li Gan is, he won’t dare come again to cause a scene. Yu Er, you are so smart!”

I handed a lipstick to her “Just tally a list of the broken items and give it to me later.” I think to myself – Li Yan, I have no clue how you managed to fan the flames, but the fire has reached me now. So you’ll be paying for half of the broken items. General Li is a decent man and I don’t want to take advantage of him, so I’m putting this tab on you.

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 1 - Chapter 13

Chapter 13: Falling Petals

The first day of the New Year means happiness? Happiness my rear end! I'm controlling a bellyful of bad temper. Grandpa sees my furrowed brow and gives Xiao Feng a quizzical look, but Xiao Feng just shakes his head indicating that he doesn't know. I can't wait any longer so I bow to Grandpa and then rush off to the Bamboo Residence.

It is the first time I use my foot to open the door, giving off a bang and the door opens. Before I can say anything, Jiu Ye smilingly asks "Is it Xiao Yu?"

His voice is the best defuser and my hot temper suddenly deflates. I lower my foot and gently enters the room. He is sitting at the table, holding a bamboo and carving it. He puts down the bamboo and carving knife to welcome me in to sit down.

I sit down next to him and stare at the table. He asks "Are you angry?"

I remain silent, so he says "So not angry then? How was your New Year? Last night Tian Cao dragged me along with them...."

I furrow my brow and give a deathly glare at the table, but he continues nattering on and on, from when he arrived at the banquet, to toasting, to getting drunk, to.....

I've never seen him so talkative so I stare and ask "I'm angry, can't you tell? You should ask why I'm angry, and ask if you did anything wrong?"

He looks innocent and muffles his laughter "Oh! Why are you angry? Did I do anything wrong?"

I give a sigh of annoyance and flop on the table. Why is he so clueless? What is it that I like about him? He has a weird personality, seemingly welcoming on the surface but really keeping people thousands of miles away. He does know a lot, but it's not like I want to marry a book. His identity is rather secretive, seemingly a Han citizen but perhaps plotting something against the Han Empire.....I keep trying to think of more bad qualities he possesses.

He looks hopeless "I asked but you won't answer, so what should I do now?" I angrily slap the table "You have no sincerity! You might as well not ask, and just keep talking about how much fun you had during the New Year!"

The room descends into silence, and I suddenly worry that he's angry at me. I raise my head to look at him and I see his open palm. Inside is a pair of gold and jade earrings "Is this sincere enough for you?"

I raise my head to look at him and pick up the earring. The gold represents the sand and the green is the water. Even though the Yue Ya Spring is but a small oasis in the desert, he managed to use my name (Jin Yu means gold jade) and find an even deeper meaning into the gift. We met in the golden desert, and almost got in a tussle outside the blue-green spring. The artisan who crafted this delicate piece is truly talented.

I study it and then put it on, with a stone face I say “Not bad. Seeing as how generous you are, I’ll let this one slide.”

I try to be serious but can’t help myself and start laughing. He was looking at me but his eyes had a flash of concern, and then he averts his eyes.

Shi Yu comes in bearing two steaming bowls and places it before me. I look at it and murmur “You didn’t call me so I thought you forgot and didn’t keep your promise.”

He doesn’t say anything for a few moments before speaking in the softest of voices “How can I forget? No matter what, today is all about making you happy.” I grab the bowl of noodles and reply indistinctly “Happy or not, it all depends on you.”

Finished with the birthday noodles, Jiu Ye chats with me and then picks up the bamboo and knife. I ask if he’s making a flute? He nods “This bamboo comes from a special mountain region where it has grown for ten years. No matter the weather change, the sound quality won’t change. It has a beautiful name, called “Xiang Fei Zhu” (Consort Xiang Bamboo). The sound is even more crystal clear than the average bamboo flute.”

I lean forward to look “So this is the famous bamboo! Looking at the spots on it, it resembles tears. It’s so pretty.”

Jiu Ye suddenly stiffens and then expertly distances himself from me. He laughs that if I want it, he’ll give it to me. He has a lot of flutes, but seeing this great material makes him itchy to make one himself. I laugh “I am someone who never rejects a present.”

He nods but doesn’t say anything else.

When I leave the Shi Estate, I run into Shen Xing and Tian Cao and I bow to them, wishing them a happy new year. Shen Xing sees my earrings but doesn’t comment on it, whereas Tian Cao keeps looking “Jiu Ye spent all that effort, so it was to give you a present.”

I touch the earrings and asks what he means? Tian Cao smiles “Jiu Ye learned jade artistry when he was young, but doesn’t practice every day. Because this was such a delicate piece, for this item, he even went to consult an expert for a few days. He wasted a lot of great pieces of jade to get it right. He is really talented with these pieces, from weapons to daily items, nothing he can’t make. Watching him make this, I realized then that the hardest thing in the world to make is a woman’s piece of jewelry.”

I dumbly ask “Do you’re saying Jiu Ye hand made this?” He just smiles at me and bows farewell. I stand there in a daze.

“I don’t know how old I am, but Li Yan is already pregnant and about to become a mom. I’m still here floating around. If there isn’t someone right for me, I won’t get married. But if there is someone right for me, I will seize the opportunity. If there is a chance of happiness before me and I don’t seize it, Papa will call me a fool. Am I a fool? Of course

I'm not. I am the beautiful, smart, clever, and cute Jin Yu. So even if you are the floating cloud, I will capture you. You are who I like, right? You once said we are different, but I am working hard to read all the books you like. I believe I can be the same type of person as you. If you want to be the condor, I will be the wind to keep you afloat; if you are want of leaving this all behind, we can buy a few horses and disappear; thank god you don't like Confucious, because I respect him but don't particularly want to emulate him, though if you like him, I will try to behave myself...."

I bite down on the ink brush and look at the cloth. I am trying to cheer myself up, so how did my writing get so confusing? I've told myself many times that he will like me, he will like me..... I'm afraid to write more, so I write the date on the side and quickly put this cloth away.

.....

I shake for a good long while before a fortune telling stick pops out of the cannister. Huo Qu Bing reaches over and is about to grab it but I've already retrieved it. He asks "What are you wishing to know?" and I shake my head "Not telling you."

He humphed "What could you possibly ask for? If it's not business then it's marriage. Right now your business is in the palm of your hands, why ask the fortune on that. So clearly it must be marriage." I insist it's not marriage.

A fortune stick reader is looking at me, and stands up when he sees me heading towards him. I suddenly stop and walk away. Huo Qu Bing laughs "Why are you not asking now?"

I hold the fortune stick in my hand and walk for some time before tossing it into the bushes. "Not asking anymore. He can tell another person's fortune but not his own. He's dressed well and clearly is hoping to get paid well after telling me what I want to hear. Why doesn't he tell his own fortune, as to whether he can get my business?"

He laughs "As least you know when to stop, so that means you're not so desperate yet."

Thinking back, I feel so silly. But when I saw the sign that said "Telling Marriage Fortunes", my feet just walked me inside. Like someone who is really sick is willing to find any doctor. I feel silly now but still want to act like I'm not "I thought it was amusing and was just checking it out."

Huo Qu Bing looks at me with a smile and doesn't argue with further, letting me win this one. A gust of wind blew past and I breathed in the scent "It's so fragrant, what kind of flower is this?"

"It's the acacia."

I look at him sideways "Why did you call me out today? To go mountain climbing?"

He slowly walked "No reason. Can't I call you out? Just walking around, shopping, why don't you look at the acacia tree above you?"

I don't even hear the rest of what he was saying. All my attention is on the carriage in front of me. Huo Qu Bing looks at me and then follows my eyes to the carriage, which is stopped before an estate. I smile at him "I suddenly have something come up, so I need to leave now."

He grabbed me “Don’t go!”

I force his hand away “I’ll go find you another day and apologize for this.” Before I finish I’m already drifting towards the carriage. Behind me he calls out “Xiao Yu!”

I don’t turn around and continue walking forward, stopping besides the carriage. I knock on the carriage and Jiu Ye raises the curtains and smiles to see me “Why are you outside the city today?”

I hold his curtain up “Aren’t you outside the city yourself?” I look at his assistant, so he smiles and explains “My grandmother’s last name was Shi, her first name was Qing. This Qing Estate is a place where grandfather built for grandmother. I don’t want to renovate it for wheelchair access, so it’s not convenient for me to move about here.”

I look at the estate and feel a sense of envy, to know there was a man who was so in love with his wife. I used to wonder why the family is named Meng but chose to name the business Shi Enterprises. And all the orphans adopted by the family have the last name Shi as well. Today I finally understand that the last name belonged to the woman his grandfather loved.

Jiu Ye gets off the carriage and uses a crutch, the one I saw in his study that day. Instead of looking awkward, he’s elegant and graceful using it. Since it’s the first time I’ve seen him standing, I stare at him.

He laughs “Is this really that weird?” and I quickly shake my head “No, no, it’s that it looks so....good!”

He stared at me so I tried to explain “Hasn’t anyone told you the impression you give? You.....you....your every gesture is very.....” The more nervous I get the harder it is for me to find the right description. But I wanted to explain, worried that he would misunderstand why I kept staring at him.

He reached out and smoothed my wind blown hair and stared at me, saying gently “Yu Er, that’s enough. I understand what you mean.”

I smile at him and over his shoulder, I can see Huo Qu Bing standing there, looking at us from far away. My heart inexplicably lurched and I averted my eyes.

Jiu Ye walked with his crutch and explained how his grandfather built this estate to harness the natural hot springs of this region. He’s here to soak in the hot springs, which is good for stimulating circulation. I sneak a peek at his legs, still not sure what his ailment is, though he doesn’t walk with difficulty when using the crutch.

Before entering the estate, I look back and Huo Qu Bing still stands in the same spot. In the Spring air, the acacia is nearing the peak of its blooming. A sea of white blankets the trees, and when a wind blows past, the petals swirl in the air like snow flakes. Normally he loves to be tidy, but he actually stands there without moving, letting the petals land on his head and his robe.

The Lover’s Vines are starting to sprout white buds, playing hide-and-seek with me so I have to search around to count how many have sprouted. I tell them to work extra hard

this year, since I've put in earthworms and found extra fertilizer for them, to grow big and beautiful.

The vines lightly ripple in the wind, like it hears my plead "When you open big and beautiful, I'll bring him to meet you" and I lightly kiss a newly sprouted leaf "you guys work hard, and I will also work hard."

I enter the Bamboo Residence to be told that Jiu Ye is visiting Xiao Feng's grandpa at the Orchid Suite, but I can see his empty wheelchair in the yard. Tian Cao explains to me that Jiu Ye has one leg that has no strength, but his other leg is fine. If he used a crutch he can walk, though not far, but it's better for his circulation than sitting in a wheelchair all day.

He explains further that when they were kids, Jiu Ye always wanted to tag along despite his bad leg. But Tian Cao and the older boys didn't know better and was always devising tricks to shake him off. Jiu Ye figured out what they were doing and became more subdued and started burying his head in books more. One day Jiu Ye sneaked out with his crutch and returned late that night bloodied and bruised. He refused to explain what happened, only saying he fell.

They felt terrible and beat up every bully in Chang An before discovering what had happened. Jiu Ye had read Mo Zi and wanted to find a metal works in the city to discuss how to make weapons. As he walked, some kids taunted him for being a cripple and he got in a fight with them. Afterwards, when they wanted to take Jiu Ye out, he always refused and he also refused to used his crutch ever again in front of others.

Tian Cao asked if I blamed them, and I said no, especially if Jiu Ye didn't blame them. He was impressed with how straight forward I am. I explained "As long as I am doing well, and the people I care about are doing well, I won't hurt others for no reason. Is there something wrong with that?"

He quickly responded "Of course! And don't misunderstand, but we really are grateful to you. When Jiu Ye returned, he started using his crutch in front of others. You helped us relieve this huge burden in our hearts all these years."

I'm upset the assistant told everyone that I was there that day, and Tian Cao laughs that the way I was adoringly staring at Jiu Ye was also discussed, to everyone's amusement.

I got mad, which is when Jiu Ye came in on his crutch. I glare at Tian Cao and ask that the assistant be punished for being bad. Tian Cao promises that they are all so busy these days no one has time to gossip. Sheng Xing enters and is happy to see me, but Tian Cao pushes him out quickly, and soon it's just me and Jiu Ye in the courtyard.

My heart flutters, a sweetness within the awkwardness of the moment. Jiu Ye acts like nothing happened and wheels himself into the room. "The flute made from the Xiang Fei Zhu is done. It's already so elegant that carving more designs on it would be too much, so I decided to be lazy for once. Do you like it?"

I took the flute from him "I don't understand these things, so whatever you say must be good."

He laughs "You have a world famous musician in your dancing house, one that everyone would kill to learn from. Why don't you ask him to teach you?"

I think about Li Yan Nian, and then think about Li Guan Li, causing me to wrinkle my brows. I tell Jiu Ye that Li Guan Li is like the saying “a dragon has nine sons, each of whom are different.” Jiu Ye tells me I can kick him out if he annoys me. He doesn’t know that I can’t kick him out because of Jiu Ye. He asks me about how fast my businesses are expanding, wondering why I’m doing all this? My heart is happy knowing that he’s keeping tabs on me, so I tell him that I have my own reasons.

He sits in silence for a few moments before talking “Yu Er, do you know why I don’t go outside on crutches? I use a wheelchair to let people think I am very weak, and even Tian Cao and those guys think I can’t walk very far. I am crippled and somewhat weaker, but I am not as weak as they believe.” I ask why he’s doing this act on purpose then?

Jiu Ye explains “I’m putting on this act for the Emperor. My mother was the grand niece of the Dowager Queen Bao, and when she was small she was always playing in the Palace. Back then the Emperor and my mother were close cousins. So when the Dowager Empress Bao was still alive, the Shi Enterprises and the Bao family were very close. When the Bao family fell from favor, the Emperor was wary of the Shi family’s wealth and power. So after mother and father died, and the family business ended up in my hands, if it wasn’t for the fact that I was a cripple, and the family businesses slowly bled money under my watch, there was no way I would not have been extinguished in Chang An.”

This is the first time he’s told me about his background so I listen in shock. I wonder how old he was when this happened, and how he had to shoulder the lives of so many people under the Shi family protection, and learn to survive with the Han Emperor watching his every move. He’s only explaining his family’s ties with the Han dynasty, but what about with Xi Yu? How heavy must that other burden be as well. Walking this road alone, how much has he endured?

He watched me and said slowly “Yu Er, the current Emperor is very calculating and decisive. When the time arrives, he can order anyone killed. So don’t do anything to go against the Imperial family. In Chang An, if you want to compete with other businesses, I can....still....” He swallowed what he wanted to say and finished with this. “Yu Er, please think carefully before you do anything.”

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 1 - Chapter

14

Chapter 14: Stargazing

“Bam!” I slam my chopsticks on the table “What is this? A perfectly fine steamed bun, why are you putting weird things in it?”

Hong Gu gave me an odd look and continued to eat her steamed bun “An acacia flower scented steamed bun is very fragrant, and I purposely told the kitchen to do it. A few days ago you got mad when I used acacia flowers to brew some tea. And today this steamed bun has offended you. What did the acacia do to you that the moment you see it, you flip your lid?”

I sit there in silence and stew while Hong Gu keeps eating and ignores me.

It’s not the acacia that offends me, it’s that I don’t want to think about the person standing under the acacia trees.

I lay in bed for a long time unable to go to sleep. I put on a robe and open the door. There are stars outside, and I see a black shadow figure standing next to the Lover’s Vines. I startle for a moment before immediately recognizing who it is. I am momentarily speechless.

Huo Qu Bing turns around and looks at me for a few moments before saying “You didn’t keep your promise. You said you would come find me in a few days, and til now you still haven’t come.”

I walked up to him in silence because I don’t know how to respond. I look at the Lover’s Vines, where one flower is starting to bloom. In excitement I yell out “Look! That flower is blooming, the first flower of the year.”

Huo Qu Bing gives the flower a side look “It appears that I’m the first person to see the flower bloom.”

I take a deep breath “It smells lovely, can you smell it?”

Huo Qu Bing answered “I missed the flowers blooming last year because I was in Xi Yu. But at least they are considerate, allowing the first flower to bloom for me.”

I smiled “I’ve never seen anyone as full of himself as you, assuming flowers would open just for you! It was just a coincidence is all.”

He stared at the flower, like there was a lot on his mind “Sometimes timing is everything. Some things, if it happened one step earlier, everything would be different.”

“One, two, three....” I bury my head in the flowers and count the buds. He was so amused he laughed “You aren’t planning on counting all those buds, are you?”

I laugh back “If I can’t count them, that would make me happier, because it means they are working hard to bloom.”

Huo Qu Bing asked “Why are they called Gold Silver Flowers? I see the white which looks like silver, but where is the gold? I play coy “I won’t tell you now. Come back in a few days to look at the flowers and you’ll see why.” He smiled “I’ll take that as an invitation then, an invitation from a beautiful woman is one I will definitely not miss.” I gasp “You are such a.....”

He suddenly grabbed my elbow and steered me outside “Tonight there is a sky full of stars, I’ll take you somewhere fun.” I hesitated but noticed that he was in a good mood, so I don’t have the heart to say no. I quietly follow behind him.

We went to Shang Lin Fan, an Imperial retreat with thirty-six different pavilions and residences on the premises. I ask which one we were going to, and he is amused that I’ve not been scared out of my wits to be here.

I tell him “If I get in trouble, I’ll be taking you down with me.” He stared at me “So are you staying we will live together and die together?” I scoff and ignore his crazy talk.

He takes me to Shen Ming Tai (The God’s Tower), the highest building in Shang Lin Fan. On top of the tower, one can see the entire Shang Lin Fan and half of the city of Chang An. Stargazing up there is likely comparable to watching the stars in the desert. I think about how the view doesn’t have any obstructions and a wide expansive vista, and immediately my heart is intrigued. We flip over walls and safely arrive there. Because no one lives there and it doesn’t house any valuables, there is no guard on duty, just the occasional guard walking by on his rounds.

I climb the stairs in the darkness with Huo Qu Bing. Before we arrive at the top, we heard the sound of two voices from above. We both stop and he whispers angrily “Now which bastard is that?”

I laugh “So only you can come here, but no one else can enjoy it? Since there is already someone, let’s go back!” He tells me “You find a place to hide while I go see which bastard it is and then kick him out.” I pulled at him but he was already at the top.

What a overlord! No wonder there isn’t a single person in Chang An who dares to piss him off. I look around and want to hide outside the window when he quietly returns. He takes my hand and immediately pulls me down the stairs. I want to ask him “Who is that upstairs that would make you hurry up and leave?” He replied “The Emperor.”

I smirk “So it’s that bastard the Emperor.” He gives me a warning look but I can see he’s trying hard not to laugh. I pull his hand “Let’s go up and check it out.”

“What is there to check out? If you get captured, I won’t help you.” He refused to move, so I tugged at his elbow and pleaded “It’s impossible to eavesdrop on the Emperor, so can we go up and listen. Plus he’s.....he will surely not notice us.” Huo Qu Bing looked at me and then sighed, pulling me up without another word.

Just like I suspected, Li Yan was there. Under a sky full of stars, Li Yan was sitting on Liu

Che's lap, and Liu Che used his cape to wrap Li Yan tightly. He was casually sitting on the ground and the two of them were snuggled together, not saying a word.

Huo Qu Bing whispered in my ear "There is nothing to overhear, but perhaps there will be a peep show to see....." I glare at him and give him a pinch. He grabbed me and then bit my ear. The two of us were tightly pressed against each other. I can't yell out or struggle, so I just reach for his hand. Initially he thought I was going to try something so his hand was tense and on guard. Seeing that I just held his hand and lightly shook it, he was silent for a moment before the strength in his hand went away. He tenderly kissed my ear lobe and released me. I lightly tripped because my body was tingling, so in that moment I felt weak-kneed. When I gathered my wits and wanted to get him back for that, I heard Liu Che tenderly say "The Palace residence is higher than this. After you give birth and can move about freely, let's go up there and look over the entire Chang An city."

I hurry to hear how Li Yan responded "That Palace is where all the hundreds of ministers pay fealty to my lord husband. As your wife I dare not go." Li Yan and Liu Che's privately converse like they are a normal husband and wife couple. He does not refer to himself as the Emperor, and she does not call herself his consort wife. Huo Qu Bing, who is pressed tightly behind me, lets out a long sigh. I lightly squeeze his hand.

Liu Che laughs out loud "If I say you can go, you can go. Who dare object." Li Yan wraps her arms around Liu Che's neck and kisses him "Your majesty taking your consort wife here to look at the view, your consort wife is already very happy. The most important thing is that there is just the two of us. You are my husband and I am your wife. Oh, and your child. Our entire family is here and that is all I ask for. The Emperor may want to make me happy, but I don't want your majesty ever to frown. I don't want people to use my visit there as fodder for political conversation. I don't want you to be unhappy, I want you to always smile."

Liu Che was silent for a few moments before saying "I feel the same way about you" before pulling Li Yan tightly into his embrace.

Li Yan, Li Yan, this man cherishes you without any reservation or hesitation. Can you protect your heart? Is this real or playacting? I can't tell, so how can you be certain yourself? Are you plotting a battle with each step, or stepping ever deeper into the abyss with each step?

I want to listen more, but remembering Huo Qu Bing, decide it's enough. I pull his hand to indicate that we should leave. As we are turning, my skirt gets caught and the sound of ripping renders the silent night.

Liu Che roared "Who is it?"

I was frantic and looked at Huo Qu Bing, but he shook his head indicating I needn't worry, he was here. He pulled me up on the tower roof.

"Your servant I wanted to come view the stars on this clear night, and didn't realize we would be thinking the same thing. Apologies for interrupting your majesty's and your highness' enjoyment. Your majesty did not bring a servant, so you must have snuck here alone as well?" Huo Qu Bing bowed to the Emperor with a twinkle in his eye.

Huo Qu Bing brushed aside the sneaking into Imperial grounds, and made it seem like

running into the Emperor here was just coincidence because they both had the same idea. Liu Che has no way to response other than let it go. He smiled when he saw me, then said to Huo Qu Bing “I haven’t chastised you, and here you are asking me questions. Looks like we have other ideas in common as well tonight, in addition to what you just said.”

I bowed deeply to the Emperor and then went to stand behind Huo Qu Bing. Liu Che lets go of Li Yan, who stands up and gives me a dead eyed stare, and then looks towards the ground. I sigh inside, thinking of how to explain this to Li Yan.

Liu Che addressed me “Since you are here to stargaze, don’t just look at the ground, boldly look around. I heard you were raised in Xi Yu, so at least you should be more carefree.” I lower my head and answer yes, then look up at a distance, despite not really seeing anything.

Li Yan tenderly says “Your majesty, we have enjoyed the views, we should be going now. I am feeling tired.” Liu Che looks at Li Yan’s protruding belly and quickly got up “It is time to go. You guys can have this spot.” He smiles at Huo Qu Bing and then picks up his lantern, leaving with Li Yan.

Huo Qu Bing and I kneel to send the Emperor off. When Liu Che reaches the staircase, he suddenly turns to Huo Qu Bing with a smile “I’ll let you off the hook this time, but you will come explain everything to me in a few days.” Huo Qu Bing smiled “Your servant will obey.”

Li Yan suddenly mentioned how she’s going to view the lilies in the pond in a few days and wants me to accompany her. I quickly answer that I will obey her request.

After they leave, Huo Qu Bing pulls me up “When you see the Emperor, you are more docile than when a rabbit sees a tiger.”

I walk to the edge and lean on the railing “How should I behave when I see the Emperor? Talk freely?” He leaned on the railing next to me “This is good. There are lots of docile women in the Palace and the Emperor is sick of them. Li Yan retains a woman’s tenderness but has some steel in her backbone and a bit of wildness, which is what attracts the Emperor.”

I ask if he’s alright and he smiles “I am constantly in and out of the Palace, and it’s not that I haven’t seen the Emperor close with one of his wives. But for you, an unmarried girl, to see this....” I glare at him “You know I wasn’t asking about this.”

He looked out into the distance “Like I said, I’ve seen the Emperor with many women. But this is the first time I’ve seen him sitting silently with a woman, just embracing each other. Nothing more. And this is the first time I’ve heard the Emperor talk to a wife in in first person without the honorifics. I was just shocked initially.”

He sighed “The Emperor is just a man, and sometimes he needs a woman to just see him as an equal, because so many people revere him. My aunt isn’t bad, but her personality is much too gentle and docile. Years ago, under the control of Dowager Queen Bao, the Emperor didn’t know if he could retain his throne. And his first Queen had a bad temper, unreasonable and spoiled. With his frustrations back then, he needed a woman like my aunt, someone who worshipped him with her very being. But now the Emperor is full of power and strength, at the prime of his rule, now he needs a woman who he can sit and

laugh with, and who will sometimes give him a bit of temper.”

I laugh “You always speak up for the Emperor, no wonder he values you so much.” He laughed “How many Emperor’s were faithful in history. This my aunt already knows, so it’s not a big deal. Today there is Consort Li. In the future there will be Consort Wang and Consort Zhao. So why get upset about it.”

Like he said, there is no hundred day flower in the Palace harem. If it wasn’t Li Yan, another woman will catch the Emperor’s fancy. If Li Yan doesn’t interfere, then no one will mind her. But if she gives birth to a boy, she will want to stop the Han encroachment on Xi Yu by putting her son on the throne. At that time, the battle between the Li family and the Wei family will surely be unavoidable. For the first time, my head hurts and I sigh. “What’s wrong?” he asks.

I shake my head and look at the stars. Tonight we sit side by side stargazing, will we one day become enemies? If this tenderness will one day become a shattered memory, then I want to treasure this very moment.

I laugh and point “Do you know where the milky way came from?” He scoffed “Even though I don’t like reading, but I have heard the story of the cow herd and the weaver girl. That is the cow herd star. Can you find the weaver girl star?” I look carefully and point, but he shakes his head. I point at another and he shakes his head again. I point at a third and say this must be it, otherwise he’s mistaken.

He bops me over the head “You’re the stupid one and you question me? In the army we need to use the stars to determine our position. Before I could even walk I was sitting on my uncle’s lap recognizing the stars.”

I rub my head and ask “I’m stupid? You’re not smart either. Only when an idiot looks at another idiot do they like each.....” I don’t finish and just shut my mouth. I’m like a fat pig running into a butcher’s shop, looking to be slaughtered. Why did I mention that?

Huo Qu Bing leans on the railing and looks at me, with a half smile. His staring is making me nervous so I pretend to be calm and look back up at the sky “What about that one?” He lightly laughed “Your face is red.” I retort “It’s the Summer right now, and I’m hot, okay?”.....

The beautiful scenery, with stargazing such an enjoyable experience. Our two voices appear to be drifting under the sky full of stars, with the stars twinkling as if it is secretly smiling.

.....

I walk with Li Yan by the lake shore and tell her that my saving the Grand Duke in the desert was by coincidence and I didn’t know his identity. And running into her stargazing was also a coincidence. There is nothing going on between us. She has a slight smile “You may not have something going on with him, but he clearly has something going on with you. Everyone knows his temper, with his eyes on the top of his head. But when he looks at you, his eyes stay right where they are.” I try to explain that I saved his life and he’s just polite towards me.

She looked at me “I heard you hired a teacher for my second brother. Even though you

don't hold a contract to Fang Ru's life, but she feels indebted to you, and will not leave until you say so. If she doesn't leave, then my big brother will keep waiting for her. Plus the Princess, and Li.... Everyone appears to be a chess piece for you. Jin Yu, what exactly do you want?"

I silently think to myself that I don't want riches or power, what I want is more simple than anything out there. I just want to be with Jiu Ye. If Jiu Ye is willing to leave Chang An, then I can throw everything here away and leave with him. But he won't, so I have no choice but to stay here, and do what I can to be a big tree and help block him from the rain and the wind. I don't want to be a flower seeking shelter under his branches. If the flower is a woman at her most seductive, then I still would rather be a stolid tree. That way I can alleviate some of his burdens.

Li Yan knows that I run the dancing houses but always come up with new fashions and hairstyles that the ladies want to copy. Plus I've opened some salons for only the rich ladies and wives to sip tea, and it is there I'm likely the recipient of all the salient gossip in Chang An about the political tide. I see that Li Yan is aware of what is happening outside the Palace, which means she is starting to get support inside the Palace to pass her this information. I commend her on seeing through what I thought was a very subtle plan of mine.

Her eyes twinkle "It's because you are Jin Yu, and I always need to be wary of you. What do you really want?"

I promise that whatever I do, our goals will not be in conflict. She used to think so, but seeing me with Huo Qu Bing, she's not so sure anymore. While everyone is a chess piece for me, why does it seem like I've purposely ignored the largest chess piece – Huo Qu Bing.

"I....I...." I cannot explain, having no reason that Li Yan would believe. This is the first time I'm realizing that as I am planning, he's completely slipped by. I really forgot about using him. I give a bitter laugh "I don't have a good reason. Perhaps it is because this chess piece is too valuable, so I won't use it lightly."

I tell Li Yan that the Yue Ren Ge she taught me before she entered the Palace, I learned it to play for the Big Boss of the Shi Enterprises. Does she believe now that nothing is going on between me and Huo Qu Bing? She looks at me and then asks me to make an oath to her. I refuse, I cannot promise I will never become her enemy. What if she hurts me first? That was not the oath she wanted. She wanted me to swear on the life of the person I love that I will never ever divulge her background. I am angry, but I agree to swear an oath on life of the man I love that I will never reveal her identity. She points to the sky, that the Gods have heard me.

She tells me not to hate her. She is walking an exhausting road. Empress Wei controls the back Palace harem, with General Wei and General Gong Xun on the outside, and now added to it is Huo Qu Bing. Li Yan might have the Emperor's favor now, but who knows how long that will last. While Empress Wei seems benign and gentle, she can afford to be because other people do her dirty work for her. We walk until suddenly a man calls out a greeting to her highness Consort Li.

We turn and see Li Gan. Third master Li might not be as flashy and radiant as Huo Qu

Bing, he's still the ideal catch for all the ladies in Chang An. Huo Qu Bing's aura is too bright, too strong, making it hard for people to get close, having no clue where he's headed. Li Gan is like a mountain, giving ladies a feeling of security.

He smiles to see me, asking if I remember him from last year when Huo Qu Bing brought me to the army barracks. I tell him I remember, and that I am here today at the summons of Consort Li. Li Yan tells Li Gan that I am the owner of Luo Yu Fan. His eyes suddenly turn dark and ominous, shooting daggers at me. I avoid his gaze and turn to see Consort Li, who makes it clear she isn't always going to be manipulated by me, it's time I tasted my own medicine.

I glared at her and decided to pretend to be clueless. We both notice that Li Gan's sleeve has the same "Li" character embroidered directly on it. While Li Gan looks like he is furious, Li Yan has tenderness in her eyes, while I plaster on a happy smile.

Huo Qu Bing's cold voice rings out "Li San (Third Li), what are you looking at?" From his angle all he can see is Li Gan staring at me, but he can't tell the look Li Gan is shooting me. He can only see my happy smile, but doesn't know my internal struggle with Li Yan right now.

Li Gan wants to explain but can't, how can he explain that he hates me right now because of Li Yan. Huo Qu Bing's expression grows colder, wondering what it is that Li Gan can't explain, likely thinking really far off conjectures.

The situation is so ridiculous and awkward that Li Yan and I have no choice but to collapse in laughter against each other. Even Li Gan has no choice but to shake his head and laugh, leaving Huo Qu Bing watching us laughing oddly.

Liu Che and Princess Pingyang arrive and ask why we are all laughing. Li Yan looks at me and says that I told a funny joke. I punt the ball and say I was merely retelling the joke I heard from Master Li, who should be the one to tell it now. Everyone looks at Li Gan while Huo Qu Bing stares at me with icy precision. I wrinkled my brows at him, that silly idiot. How could I have had any opportunity to hear a joke from Li Gan.

Li Gan thinks for a moment and then tells the joke, which does meet with enjoyment. Though his joke was really a jab at me, discussing how crafty people who want to achieve their own selfish goals will sacrifice others for their own gain. When Li Gan is talking, Li Yan keeps looking at his sleeve and shooting me pleading looks. She feigns tiredness and is escorted by the Emperor off to rest at the nearby pavilion.

We follow behind, with the Princess talking with Huo Qu Bing, while Li Gan and I take up the rear. Huo Qu Bing shoots me a deathly glare and I give him another brow wrinkle and ignore him. As we neared the pavilion, I slip right next to Li Gan and reach for him. He is adept at martial arts and has a great reflex, immediately avoiding me. But I was expecting his move so I went the other way, and since I also know martial arts, my hand is able to grab onto his sleeve. With a loud rip, the sleeve tears and everyone turns to look at us. The expression on Huo Qu Bing's face could not be more furious.

Li Gan angrily points at me while I profusely apologize. I drop his sleeve on the ground and step on it during my apology, until the Li character is no longer recognizable.

Huo Qu Bing suddenly hollered "What are you two doing? Is this a place for you guys to

be pushing and pulling?" Li Gan finally understands why I purposely tore his sleeve, and he and I immediately get on our knees to beg forgiveness from the Emperor. Li Yan wants to ask for us as well, but the Emperor is in a good mood and chats with the Princess about his mishaps in his youth. Liu Che looks from Huo Qu Bing to me to Li Gan and tells us to get up, and tells Li Gan to go change. Li Gan gets up and smoothly picks up his sleeve before leaving.

Princess Pingyang laughs that the Emperor is totally biased towards Qu Bing and got rid of Li Gan so quickly. Liu Che laughs and looks at the stone-faced Huo Qu Bing "If I don't get rid of Li Gan now, should I wait until they start fighting. At which time I can't punish them, and I can't not punish them." The Princess laughs that with Qu Bing's temper, he'd totally do that.

A potentially dangerous situation is averted and I'm tired. Li Yan looks odd so the Emperor has her sent to rest and we are all excused. Huo Qu Bing walks next to me but doesn't say a single word. I am thinking about what I discussed with Li Yan, and with a mind full of worries, I'm also stone-faced.

Once we exit the woods, I bow to him so that I can leave, and he angrily says "I'll take you home." I tell him it's not necessary, I'm headed somewhere else first. He jumps in the carriage and orders me inside, with a look that brokers no argument. I laugh and jump in, knowing I have no choice. "Don't be mad at me, I'm going to General Li's estate."

He glared at me and ordered the carriage driven there. I look at him and put myself in his position, feeling a tinge of pain for him, so I softly explain "I am not close to Li Gan. I met him for the first time when you brought me to the Yu Lin Army barracks, and this is the second time we've met."

His face softens but his voice is still cold "The second time you've met and you behave this way?" I reply "There was a reason. To me, Li Gan is a small peanut. When my eyes are tired, I wouldn't be able to pick him out of a crowd."

He has a slight smile on his lips "What about me?" I hesitated and answered "You're like a big doofus, is that okay?" He didn't smile and immediately followed with "What about Meng Jiu?" My face froze and I turned to look outside, two piercing eyes staring a hole in the back of my head.

When we arrive at General Li's estate, Huo Qu Bing just walks in, clearly used to being here. I ask why he's following since I'm going to see Li Gan. Huo Qu Bing replies "It looks like you are following me, not me following you. If you want, you can return to the front door and have a servant announce you."

I glare at him and follow him silently. He finds out from a servant that Li Gan is practicing archery in the practice yard, and Huo Qu Bing heads over there without needing any directions.

Li Gan is shooting arrows in the archery field. His every release is powerful, the arrow thundering into the center of the target. I marvel at his prowess, clearly a descendant of a great military family. Li Gan turns and sees me, and he points the arrow in his hands towards me.

In that moment I know Li Gan is not just trying to scare me. His face is thunderous and

cold, with deep hatred within his eyes. He really wants to kill me. My body freezes and I can't move and can't talk. I'm afraid that the slightest movement will upset him and his arrow will come flying towards me. The world famous archery skills of this family, I doubt I can avoid it. Huo Qu Bing makes a quick move and he's blocking me. His attitude is cold and he faces off with Li Gan.

Li Gan's hand shakes for a moment before he turns and sends his arrow flying into the target, hitting dead center. The force is so strong that the arrow passes clean through the target, leaving only a bit of white feather remaining on the board.

I finally release my pent up breath and my body grows weak. I am a lowly person, and to these rich and powerful people, I am like an ant they can easily extinguish if they wanted. I kept using my mind to strategize, but I forgot that one arrow can easily end my life. All my tactics are nothing in the face of this situation.

Thank god Huo Qu Bing followed me here today, or else..... I wasn't scared during that moment, but now I'm scared. Did Li Yan anticipate Li Gan's response? Was this her warning to me? Or perhaps she wants me dead? Who can keep a secret better than a dead person?.....

The more I think about it, the more scared I become. Huo Qu Bing turns and supports me, and this is the first time I have reached for his hand. His hand tightly grasps mine. Because he's practicing martial arts and riding a horse year round, his hands are calloused. The rough feel gives off a sense of security and comfort. My heart calmed down and my hands stopped fidgeting.

He saw that I was back to normal and shook his head with a smile "Now see if you dare come here to find Li Gan?" I can't even smile so I whisper "Why won't I dare? But next time....do follow me again."

Li Gan walked up to her and acted like nothing happened. He bowed to Huo Qu Bing "I apologize for earlier, but you suddenly walked in front of my aim and caused me a fright."

Huo Qu Bing coldly answered "Third brother, we grew together in the Yu Lin Army. When I was small First brother taught me archery. We have had a great friendship. I don't want to let any misunderstanding turn us into enemies. So I will tell you today – if you ever treat her this way again, my archery skills are no worse than yours."

I stare at Huo Qu Bing in shock, this indescribable feeling in my heart, knowing that he's protecting me without reservation. Li Gan is also shocked but quickly understands, turning towards me with a bitter smile "I lost my temper a little today, and it won't happen again. Will Ms. Jin please forgive me?"

I almost smirked. Can I understand him? Let me try to stick a knife to your neck and then ask for your understanding. I lightly murmured "I came here to say a few words." Huo Qu Bing considerably walked away to give us some privacy.

I looked at Li Gan "Consort Li came from my dancing house, and everything I do is to protect her. I think you can see this after what happened today. You must believe me. I know you like her, but does she know how you feel?"

He was quiet for awhile and then shook his head "She doesn't know. She is already an

Imperial Consort. I am just an official in her eyes. And I don't want her to know. What I feel for her is just some of my private feelings."

Just like I suspected, Li Yan is pretending like she knows nothing and pushing all the blame on me. I think and then say "I promise that I will not tell Consort Li." He coldly huffed "Years ago, you concealed what you should have told her, so I can trust you on doing this. But I met her before the Emperor did, but because of you, I ended up late to the party. Being late by even one step means a lifetime's regret, do you know that?" His sadness was mixed with rage once again.

I was afraid to continue his words "Since I concealed it from you, how did you know that Consort Li was the woman you were looking for?"

He looked pained yet also happy "In the Palace, one day I accidentally saw her using the same handkerchief. It was a different color, but the design was the same. I was stunned and kept staring at her. I realized how silly I was, other than her, there could not be another woman with the same beauty. I was initially just stunned by her dancing on the lake, and impressed with how she engaged the Emperor's attention. Back then I refused to acknowledge my feelings, until I saw the handkerchief and realized my missed opportunity. You caused all of this to happen. Ms. Jin Yu, why did you purposely lie to me? If the Heavens wanted me to see the "Li" character again, why did it have to be too late. How can I not hate you?"

My body is cold. I didn't dare tell him the truth back then so that this would not happen. Any beautiful woman, having a chance with a man like Li Gan who adores her wholeheartedly, would have picked him over the Emperor and his thousands of women. But Li Yan is not an ordinary woman, she would never choose Li Gan. But things moved in a circle and fate brings it all back to the same spot. I'm afraid to look into his eyes and I murmur "Things are what it is and is impossible to change. I beg of you, please don't hurt Consort Li. Do you know that the "Li" character on your sleeve today could have caused what havoc? It's a very distinct "Li" character that once seen will not be forgotten. I don't know if the Emperor has seen it. You cannot ever put Consort Li in such danger."

He sounded despondent "I won't hurt her. Today it was just my carelessness and I wore the wrong outfit. I will go and burn all my clothes embroidered with this "Li" character. From now on, the character will live only in my heart."

I hurry and bow to him before running towards Huo Qu Bing. He asked "The both of you looked ashen back there. What did you do to piss off Li Gan?" I forced a laugh "Just a misunderstanding, which has been cleared up." Huo Qu Bing stared at me and didn't say anything. His dark eyes remain deep in thought.

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 1 - Chapter 15

Chapter 15: A Date

Li Yan safely gives birth to a boy, which Emperor Wu of Han names Bo. He also greatly rewards Princess Pingyang, Li Yan Nian and Li Guang Li. At a time when the crown prince is not set, everyone in court is starting to speculate whether the eldest son birthed by Queen Wei Liu Ju can ascend to the Eastern Palace, or will it be the beloved Liu Bo.

Because the Wei family is so powerful, Liu Ju might have the advantage, but that may not be the case. The Wei family rose to prominence because of the Emperor's love for Queen Wei, but the same thing can happen to the Li family. Plus Liu Ju's personality is vastly different than his father, who might one day disfavor him.

While the court is abuzz, the Wei family remains calm. General Wei Qing even enters the Palace to personally congratulate Li Yan on the birth of Liu Bo. When Liu Bo is one month old, the Emperor suddenly summons all and announces that Liu Ju will be the Crown Prince. It's sudden but not a surprise, since the battle rages with the Xiong Nu and he needs the support from the Great General Wei, General Gong Xun He, and Huo Qu Bing. If Liu Ju wasn't the Crown Prince, there would be no reason for these great warriors to fight for the Emperor.

During this time, Li Yan suddenly falls ill and is in a coma for three days and three nights, only saved by the attention of the royal physicians. Liu Che was so nervous and worried he did everything he could, including summoning me to the Palace to whisper in Li Yan's ear to see if she can stir. I whisper her name, and when we are alone, I tell her "Li Yan, how can you abandon your new born baby. You still have a chance, why are you giving up?"

When Li Yan softly stirs, Liu Che is ecstatic and shows his genuine affection for her. I think to myself, this man who rules the world loves this woman and is genuinely afraid of losing her. When she wakes up and sees him, she whispers "I was so afraid I wouldn't be able to see you again." and then she kisses him on the palm of his hand. I walk outside thinking to myself "Li Yan, did you really get sick. Or did you make yourself sick?"

When I return to Luo Yu House, I'm exhausted but find Li Gan waiting for me. He looks devastated and I tell him not to worry, Li Yan is awake and with some rest for a few months should recover. His worry eases, but I can see what ails him, having to wait here for news when she's fighting for her life, unable to help her.

The sun sets and the room turns dark. He remains sitting and not moving, so I try to keep myself awake. After a long time, he speaks "If this is her wish, then I will do everything in

my power to make it come true for her. As long as she doesn't get sick again."

I lean back and sigh. Li Yan, if this illness was a coincidence, then the Gods are looking out for you. This illness caused a steely man to feel apologetic, and another to vow fealty to you and help you seek the throne for your son. Li Gan is the Li family's only heir, and his decision will surely determine the direction the family throws its support behind. If this was no coincidence, then your methods make my heart shudder. You just became a mother, and yet you can gamble with your life. A person who is so ruthless towards herself? My heart starts to feel afraid.

Li Gan and I are both deep in our own thoughts when the door suddenly opens and we both stand up in a hurry. Huo Qu Bing stares at us with a solemn expression. Li Gan and I, a man and a woman, alone in one room, that's bad enough already, but we didn't even light a lamp and appeared to be staring at each other in the darkness. This indeed looks very odd and hard to explain.

Li Gan sees Huo Qu Bing's expression and smiles a bit. He shakes his head at me, bows to Huo Qu Bing, and then walks out without saying a word. Huo Qu Bing tries to control his temper and asks "When did you two become so close? You've been in the Palace for so long, and yet you didn't even rest."

I haven't slept in two days and two nights and I'm exhausted right now. I tried to stay awake because of Li Gan, but now I don't care anymore. I flopped back on the pallet and pulled the blanket over myself "I'm so tired. Let me sleep first and then you can punish me later if you want."

Huo Qu Bing hesitated and then smiled. He walked over to the pallet and sat down. In my drowsy state, I heard him whispering in my ear "You are that comfortable around me? But I don't quite trust myself. What if I can't control myself, maybe.....maybe I will.....take you....." His breath glances over my cheek and his lips are barely brushing my skin. I'm so sleepy that I've fallen into the sweet abyss of slumber, not thinking anymore.

When I wake up, it's past noon. I look around and suddenly remember the low voice whispering in my ear. I am stunned and immediately sit up. I look down and my clothes are intact, only my shoes have been removed and placed on the floor.

I sit there in silence, there is no one next to me. Was that a dream?

The Lover's Vines don't disappoint me, a vast growth of silver and gold flowers that leave even the gardener in awe, not sure how I managed to grow it. It was easy really, I just talked to it every day, begging it to grow. Perhaps flowers can understand human emotions, knowing how much I'm longing for that man's arrival, so it grants my wish.

Jiu Ye is in his wheelchair while I am behind him. We are strolling but my heart feels like bursting. I don't hear Jiu Ye's question and need to be reminded by Xiao Feng that he's talking to me. I chat with him and we arrive at my courtyard. I make a face at Xiao Feng, who announces he's off to explore the rest of Luo Yu House now. Jiu Ye lets him go, and Xiao Feng makes a money sign towards me first before running off.

The fragrance of the flowers hit us the moment I open the door. He asks if I've planted

Gold Silver Flowers but I'm too nervous to answer. An entire garden of Lover's Vines in the sun glistening with gold, silver, and green, captivating and enchanting. He admires them and commends me on doing such a superb job of growing them.

I stare at the flowers before calming myself down "Do you know this flower has another name?" He was silent for a long time "In the Winter the leaves remain green, so it's also called "Enduring Winter"."

I smile sadly "Why are you avoiding the other name? Because the twisting flowers look like lovers dancing, so people also call them Lover's Vines."

He laughed "I momentarily forgot and just remember their medicinal name. You didn't ask me here today just to look at flowers. Lets go see the willows growing by the lake. Let's go walk by the lake."

I grab his hand, which is about to wheel away "I really just invited you here to view the flowers. I don't care if you think I am being bold and shameless. I need to tell you how I feel. I planted these Lover's Vines for you two Falls ago. It's almost two years now, Jiu Ye. I.....I like you. I want to marry you. I want to always be able to view these flowers with you. And not just me all alone watching these lovers dancing on the vines."

His hand shakes, cold as ice, and he stares into my eyes. I see the pain and the fear, all the complicated emotions tied together. I don't understand. My hand holding his is starting to get cold. I plead with him silently: I have given my heart to you. Please treasure it. Please. Treasure. It.

Jiu Ye suddenly jerks his hand out of mine and avoids my eyes. He starsd ahead at the Lover's Vines and spoke clearly, like every word needs all his strength to get out "I am not used to viewing flowers with anybody. I'm sure you'll find someone to view flowers with you."

My heart crashed on the ground, the second it hit shattering into pieces. My hand is still outstretched and suspended in the air. It's like I want to grab onto something, but my hand touches nothing, placed in an odd position.

He tried to wheel himself away but it's like his arms have no strength so he doesn't move. I grabbed his sleeve "Why? Has it been just me all this time? You have no feelings for me? What are you afraid of? Your leg? I don't care about these things, Jiu Ye. How far a person walks in their lifetime is not determined by their legs, but by their heart."

He turned his head and refused to look at me. He pulled his sleeve out of my hand and kept repeating over and over "Yu Er, you are so wonderful. There is bound to be someone who is willing to view the flowers with you."

I watched as his sleeve disappeared from my hand little by little, and I cannot stop it. So there is something in this world harder to capture than a passing cloud.

An icy cold voice rings from behind us "There is indeed someone who is willing to view flowers with her."

I remain frozen on the spot and continue staring at my hand. How can he be so cruel as to push it away? Time and time again. So the biggest sadness isn't heartbreak, it's unending despair.

Huo Qu Bing walks up to Jiu Ye “Meng Jiu of Shi Enterprises?” His face is ashen but his stance proud and arrogant.

Jiu Ye acknowledges him with a very conflicted expression, his face turning whiter “Yu Er, your friend is here, so I’ll be going now” and wheeled himself away.

Huo Qu Bing spoke up “My name is Huo Qu Bing” and Jiu Ye stopped for a moment, before continuing on his way. He murmured “I’ve long heard of your reputation, what a pleasure it is to meet you today” without turning back.

“He’s gone already” Huo Qu Bing lightly told me. I still don’t move, so he grabs me. I jerk my hand out of his and roars at him “I don’t need you to concern yourself with my business. Who told you to enter my house? Get out!”

His hands suddenly fisted and he punched the vines “Don’t forget you asked me to come view the flowers. Lover’s Vines? You only told me it was called Gold Silver Flowers.”

A few of the bamboo sticks snap, and the Lover’s Vines in front of me shudder and then collapse. A sudden loud roar later, the entire vine patch has fallen in a flurry of gold and silver.

I stand there staring disbelieving. How could it collapse? Two years I’ve carefully tended to it. How did it fall so easily? Did the dream just evaporate?

I glared at Huo Qu Bing, who also looked stunned. He was staring at the vines with confusion in his eyes “Yu Er, look at these complicated intertwining vines? Don’t you think it’s just like life.”

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I asked the gardener to try and save the Gold Silver Flowers, but the main vine has been damaged and the flowers continue to wilt one after another, with the leaves turning yellow. I watched them slowly die before me. The things I believed in my heart was also slowly dying.

Hong Gu tries to convince me to see the Shi family members, and even the ill Wu Ye tries to meet with me, but I refuse to see anyone. I took a bucket of water and splashed on the vines, apologizing for them suffering because of our complicated lives. Hong Gu says Shi Enterprises is her master and boss, and right those three heads are outside waiting for me for an entire day already, which is unheard of.

I finally allow them inside. I bow to Tian Cao, Sheng Xing, and Jing Yen, and they ask if I’m drawing a clear boundary with them now. I take a deep breath, my throat hoarse “Jiu Ye would rather lose money on his businesses but he insists on repaying my money right now. It appears that the Shi Enterprises is the one who wants to make a clear boundary with me.”

They have nothing to say to that, but Jing Yen pipes up “Xiao Yu, what happened between you and Jiu Ye? He was fine coming here, but when he got home his face was ashen like he got sick. He’s locked himself in his study for days now, only telling us to repay your loan immediately.”

My hand clenches and my nail digs into my palm. They look at each other and tell me they

understand how hard it is for me. The normally taciturn Sheng Xing suddenly speaks up “Xiao Yu, give Jiu Ye more time. A lot of emotional knots can’t get untangled in a day or two.”

I shake my head “I tried to hint at him but he keeps evading me. I try to get close but he keeps letting me get close before violently pushing me away. I ask myself why, but I can never read his expression. It’s not so simple. If it wasn’t for his legs, I would have told him long ago how I feel. But he still keeps pushing me away. I’m just a girl, and I’m telling you all this today. You grew up with him, do you know why?”

They look solemn and finally Sheng Xing answers “We cannot tell you why....perhaps.... We know Jiu Ye treats you differently. We grew up with him, these things we can tell at least. He really treats you differently. Can you please give him more time, please give him another chance?”

I laughed and laughed. When a person hurts so much they can’t cry, they just laugh. But it’s a laugh that sounds worse than crying ” Please leave now, I’m tired and need to rest.”

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Last Fall I collected a lot of Gold Silver Flower seeds, but this Fall all I have is a dead vine. Huo Qu Bing watches as I take an ax to the patch, slowly hacking away at the dead vines. “It’s all wilted, why are you even doing this?”

I answer “The gardener says that if I protect the stem, it might grow again next Spring.”

“I shouldn’t have taken out my temper on them the other day.”

I give him an odd look, with a biting sarcasm I ask “Are you apologizing to them now? The all-powerful young master Huo actually admitting he did something wrong? If news of this got out, it would shock the entire Chang An city to death.”

He looked angry “You walk around all day with a pissed off face, clearly you think I did something wrong.”

I lower my head and keep hacking at the dead vines “It’s like the Sun is rising from the West, I don’t know how to react.”

“Yu Er!” Huo Qu Bing suddenly shouted “I’m going to Xi Yu next year. If you’re not happy in Chang An, come with me for a visit to Xi Yu.”

His eyes are deep dark pools, hiding so much inner thoughts like the pitch black night. I feel it pressing down on my heart and making it hurt a little, not sure if it’s for him or for me. It’s almost three years since I last saw Brother Wolf. Is he doing well? Visiting Brother Wolf is a good idea, and it is time that I think about where I’m headed in the future. My sorrow may have no end, but life continues to go on.

“I can’t promise you now, I still have some things to handle here. If everything is taken care of, I might go back to Xi Yu.”

He smiled and nodded his head “At least it’s better than your outright rejection last year.”

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The Teacher inside is discussing General Bai Qi of the Qin dynasty and his decision over

one hundred years ago during a battle to offer surrender to the soldiers of the Zhao Kingdom, only to renege after they had surrendered, burying 40,000 soldiers alive. This ended up costing the Qin Empire even more pain because no one would surrender after wars, so every battle dragged on. One student disagrees. If General Bai had not killed those able bodied men, causing the entire Zhao Kingdom to surrender, the battle would have waged on and more people would have suffered. In the long run, he likely saved more lives of the Qin people.

The discussion goes on as students take both sides of the argument, while Li Guang Li naps off to the side. The Teacher has long given up on him, but the students I selected to study with him are doing marvelously. The extraordinary rise of the Great General Wei has students these days dreaming of their own successes based on talent and merit. I may have planned these chess pieces, but will I end up using it?

Fang Ru comes with snacks and we go inside, everyone happy to see us. The student all crowd me, thrilled to see me, asking how I'm doing and why I haven't come by in a long time. Li Guang Li gets up and stretches, offering to take everyone out to Yi Ping Ju to eat later, and they all thank him. I can see that he's rather clueless, but loves to mess around and desire wealth, but he doesn't look down on the poor. If he didn't have Li Yan for a sister, he might be living a carefree life.

I walk with Fang Ru and discuss how fast time flies, we've known each other for three years now. She commends me on transforming myself into a mover and shaker in Chang An. I laugh, saying that I am really lazy and will only do things if it benefits me. I tell her that she is my first friend in Chang An, and today I want to discuss whether she wants to marry Li Yan Nian. She blushes but doesn't say anything.

I tell her that marrying him, she will be tied to the rise and fall of the Li family from now on. She assures me Li Yan Nian isn't interest in the pursuit of power, but I tell her that it doesn't matter what he wants, it's what others might do to him. She stops and thanks me for thinking about her. But she wants to marry him, this is her life and she wants to spend it beside him.

I laugh, knowing this would be her answer. I've done what I needed to do as her friend, and she thanks me for everything I've done for her. She will treasure what she has with Li Yan Nian. I will tell Li Yan Nian to come propose then, but he needs to prepare quite a wedding red envelope for me. She blushes and thanks me.

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"What did you say?" My heart jerked in pain so I asked again.

Xiao Feng hollered "I said Jiu Ye is sick, he's sick. How many times must I say it?"

I ask why he hasn't gotten a doctor for him, and why he's telling me this. He rolled his eyes at me, asking if I'm acting stupid on purpose. He's passed word to me, that's all he came to do. He runs off.

I sit and think for awhile before going to visit him. Tian Cao opens the door for me, and I ask if Jiu Ye is willing to see me. Tian Cao says of course he will, I haven't been by in months and the Bamboo Residence is so lonely. He tells me Jiu Ye caught a cold, though the doctor thinks Jiu Ye has more than that, he's got emotional worries that is making him

sick.

I silently walk to the Bamboo Residence and Tian Cao lets me enter alone. I hesitate before telling myself to go in, it can't be worse than now. I walk in and the window is open with a breeze lightly blowing through. He lays on the pallet completely still, like he is asleep. I sneak in quietly, so he shouldn't have heard me, but he calls out "Yu Er?" in a very exhausted voice.

Inside the frigid room, I walk to the pallet and put my hands on the blanket, glad it is warm inside. He pushed a warm silver ball out to me and I tell him I'm not cold, but he insists so I take it and place it on my legs, warming me up.

In the dark, we sit in silence for a long time. If we could be like this until the end of time, I wouldn't mind.

"Jiu Ye, I have something to tell you. Please don't cut me off, or else I won't have the courage to finish. Whether you want to or not, please let me speak and then I will leave."

He was silent and I knew he wasn't stopping me. "I don't know when I started liking you, perhaps it was your warm presence under the lamplight, or when you tended to my ears. Maybe when you laughed ever so lightly. All I know is that I want to be with you. I tried to test to see if you liked me. Jiu Ye, I always told you I was sick here and there, but those were all lies. I've never gotten sick, and I'm as hale as a horse. I just wanted you to think of me every day a little, wondering what medicine to recommend for me. I'm not afraid of bitter things either, but I wanted you to worry that I wouldn't drink it. I wanted to place myself in your heart."

I smiled "Am I really sneaky? Jiu Ye, in your study that day, I know you like Zhuang Zi and Mo Zi, because they discussed weapon making and is very useful, and how small kingdoms can protect itself against the hegemon. I know you raised a lot of carrier pigeons. And last year Xi Yu needed financial assistance because of the war and the cold spell. You know a lot of Xi Yu languages, so I long suspected you were a Xi Yu person, and everything you do is to help your people."

I sneaked a peek at him and he was staring wide eyed at the ceiling, his face as still as the water. "I don't care if you are a Han or a Xi Yu person. You are you. If you want freedom, I am willing to leave Chang An with you. The desert will be our playground. If you want.....to stop the Han expansion, I can't help you win the battle, but I can help you disrupt the Han court from within, so that during your lifetime they cannot expand westward."

He turned to look at me, with shock and warmth, but I still didn't know what he was thinking.

He asked "Yu Er, did you do something secretly? Are those new businesses you opened to collect information about the secrets and weaknesses of the Han court officials?"

I bit my lips and nodded my head. He looked torn "Silly girl, close them all down now. Shi Enterprises has been here for over a hundred years, I can gather that information easily without your help." Suddenly he looked alarmed "Did you promise Consort Li anything?" I think about my deadly oath, but that doesn't count, so I shake my head. He looks relieved "That's good. Please don't get involved in the battle for the throne."

Jiu Y sees me fiddling with my skirt and appears to want to reach over but stops his hand. He smiles and explains that he is indeed a Xi Yu person. His grandfather was a prince from the Yi Nye kingdom who suffered a political upheaval and was spirited out of the palace. His servant captured a female wolf and used her milk to feed his grandfather. After he grew up, he never used the royal seal to find those loyal to him, and instead used his handsome looks to roam the Xi Yu lands and romancing all the princesses. One day he returned to the Yi Nye palace and woke up his uncle, who stole the throne. He shaved the king's head and asked for a big feast. After he was done eating, he told his uncle that he was a better king than his father, and then tossed the royal seal at him and left. He then decided to become a desert thief.

He was a spectacular thief, and his logo was the sign of the wolf since he was saved by drinking the milk of a female wolf. Turned out he was a skilled businessman, and over time he became the largest stone and precious rock merchant in all of Xi Yu, in addition to being a successful desert thief. Perhaps the Gods envied his good luck, because one day he tried to rob a Han convoy and met Jiu Ye's grandmother. He fell in love with her, but she was already a concubine to another merchant.

He followed her back to Chang An and managed to abduct her, and decided Chang An was a lot of fun so stayed here and became a merchant. I was in awe of this colorful life led by Jiu Ye's grandfather. Over the years, his grandfather would help the Xi Yu nations oppose the Xiong Nu when the Xiong Nu was powerful. Now that the Han dynasty is more powerful, Jiu Ye continues the family way of helping, but he must do it in secret because his grandmother was a Han person and he doesn't want to endanger the lives of the Shi family.

I think to myself that this is much more difficult and complicated than I even imagined. Jiu Ye needs to oppose Liu Che on one hand, but protect the lives of everyone in the Shi Enterprises. He helps the Xi Yu nations so they don't suffer in the war, taking into account the power of the Xiong Nu. Everyone is watching how the Shi Enterprises is doing, and one mistake everything gets thrown into disarray. He's been handling all of this since a young age, how difficult must his journey have been. Yet now he just glances over it all with a smile.

My heart leaps knowing he is confiding in me, does that mean he trusts me, and is willing to accept me? He looked at me and his eyes grew dark, and then he turned away. In the silence I speak "I know how you feel, so I'll tell you one more time. I don't need your answer now, because I won't be able to endure it. In a few days it will be New Year, and you once said that was a good day, and my birthday. I will be waiting for you in my courtyard. If you don't come, then I will know your answer. But...." I looked at him directly "I hope you will come."

I get up to leave, reminding him to close the windows. As I reach the door, he speaks "Don't turn around, just answer this question. Yu Er, do you want a family?"

I hold the door "Yes, I want a family. I want a loud boisterous family. When I'm on the street, I envy the couples carrying a child and bickering. When I heard your past I was envious, to have a grandfather, parents, and siblings. A big family is happiness! What about you?" There is only silence behind me, so I turn back around. In the dark he answers

“Me, too.”

That was the best thing I heard all night and I smile. He suddenly asked “Yu Er, Huo.....Huo Qu Bing, is he good to you?” I was silent and didn’t want to acknowledge this right now, but I can’t dismiss it. I lightly nod my head. After awhile, he says “You can leave now. Be careful on the road.”

I hesitated for a moment before stepping outside. When I turned I saw his dark shining eyes, filled with longing and pain all mixed together. My heart lurched and he didn’t avoid my gaze. Our eyes met and it was like a tempest. I closed the door and my arm hangs limply to the side afterwards. The door slowly closes and his face disappears from my view. This was the first time he does not avoid my gaze.

In that brief moment, all my strength feels like it’s been eaten up and I weakly lean on the wall. It was much later that I had the strength to walk away.

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 1 - Chapter 16

Chapter 16: Departure

Fang Ru and Li Yan Nian are getting married and the house is merry with activity. The girls want to go crash the wedding night but I just smile and let them have fun. Hong Gu asks why I'm having Li Yan Nian move out, and I say it's better if they have their own privacy to start their new life together. Hong Gu looks at me, she thinks I've been distancing myself from them recently. I change the subject and tell her to keep the party going, begging off to rest because I'm tired.

Fang Ru is getting dressed in her room, with the ladies all happy she chose the first day of the New Year for her wedding, but Fang Ru says the date was picked by me. She's complimented on her beautiful wedding robe, and she says it's also from me. I turn around and go back to my room. Today is a good day, the weather is clear and the sun is warm. There are lanterns everywhere and the happiness in the air is thick.

I sit down and put on make up, hearing the roar of noise outside indicating that the wedding party is here to pick up Fang Ru. I feel a tinge of sadness, this sound must be what every woman longs to hear. I put on my outfit and my hair piece and look in the mirror. I think about Brother Wolf in the desert, and twirl a few times in the room. My skirt billows out and I feel much happier.

The worst feeling is waiting, with my heart suspended, just like watching a pot boil. I look around for something to keep me occupied, and I find a rope where I proceed to knot and unknot it. After some time, I look out to see it's already dusk. I walk outside and look in the yard, with the sun setting and the dark approaching.

Maybe he doesn't want to see anyone, so he won't come during the day time. He's surely coming soon, so I stand by the door hoping and praying. Everyone has gone to the wedding banquet so the courtyard is especially quiet. A few drops land my cheek first, and soon it's coming down in a flurry, the first snow. It's not a lot, and comes down slowly and gently, dancing in the wind. It feels tender, but with the bitter cold, goes straight for the heart.

A squeak of the door opening, at that moment my heart exploded. My heart hurt so bad I couldn't turn around. Because the happiness is so hard earned, the joy even comes with some pain.

I stood still for awhile before smiling and turning around, and then my smile freezes on my face. My heart fills with despair and I close my eyes hoping it's not true. But when I open it again, he's still standing there, still Huo Qu Bing.

“When I first saw you, you were wearing this outfit. Under the silver moonlight, with a silver wolf beside you, your skirt billowing in the wind, you were so light you didn’t appear human. I never once took notice of any woman, but I couldn’t stop staring at you, wondering where you came from, wondering where you were going.” Huo Qu Bing explained with a wistful smile.

I hold my head with my hands and crouch down on the ground. He is shocked and tries to help me up. “Don’t.....don’t bother with me....” I murmur over and over again. He slowly withdrew his hand.

Huo Qu Bing pays no heed to the snow on the ground, despite his rich attire, and silently sits down next to me. It appears that no matter how long I’m crouched there, he’s going to silently keep me company.

The snow lightly falls on us, and he hesitates for a moment before reaching over and brushing the snow off me. I don’t move, like I’m an ice sculpture. He stood up and walked into the house, emerging with a bamboo umbrella. He quietly returned to my side and opened the umbrella over me. He silently looked up at the falling white flakes.

Xiao Qian and Xiao Tao return to the yard. Xiao Qian lands next to me, but Xiao Tao zooms straight for my head. With a flicker of his sleeve, Huo Qu Bing waves Xiao Tao off course so she wasn’t able to be mean to me this time. She lands next to Xiao Qian.

Huo Qu Bing goes to grab Xiao Tao and Xiao Qian wants to peck him. Huo Qu Bing avoids his beak and bops him on the head lightly “I was just getting the letter on Xiao Tao’s leg, not trying to be mean to her.” I hesitated and the opened the cloth on Xiao Tao’s leg. “I’m sorry” is scribbled messily on it.

I’m sorry? I’m sorry! I don’t want your “I’m sorry.” I feel the bitterness rising and I bite my lips so hard I can taste the blood. I tried to rip the cloth but my hands are shaking and the cloth is small so I can’t rend it even in a few tries.

I jump up and run into the house holding the cloth. I start tossing everything in sight. Huo Qu Bing stands at the door and watches me go insane and upending everything in my room. Scissors, where is the scissors? I still can’t find the scissors, and then I see a small fruit knife on the table. I grab the knife and hear him calling me “Yu Er”, and then he’s in front of me, trying to take the knife away. But he stops when he sees me slicing up the cloth. He backs up and watches me rip it into shreds.

I threw the knife to the side and rip off my veil and hairdress. Using my hands, I pull it apart until the pearls have scattered everywhere and bits and pieces of the veil are floating in the air. I stare at the falling bits of blue on the ground, and suddenly all my rage is spent. I collapse on the ground and stare at everything, seeing nothing.

Huo Qu Bing sits on the door ledge, with his arms around his legs and his chin resting on his knees, just staring at the ground. He’s so quiet he resembles an injured wolf, just sitting there licking his own wounds in the corner.

I don’t know how much time has passed, when I suddenly hear laughter. Everyone is coming back from the banquet. I startle and jump up, quickly saying with a smile and laughter “I ate so early that I’m hungry. I want to eat birthday noodles today. Today is my birthday. I should be happy. I need to change. Can you.....”

Huo Qu Bing turns his back to me and I take off my Luo Lan outfit and put on a flaming red dress robe. I'm not sad, I refuse to be sad. I refuse to be sad because of a person who doesn't like me. I hold the blue Luo Lan outfit and repeat this to myself, but a stabbing pain passes through my heart. I recall our meeting at the Yue Ya Spring, but it feels like multiple lifetimes ago. I smile, I smile so hard my body starts to shake.

The knife comes down, and with a loud rip, the skirt has been split in half. Huo Qu Bing hears the sound and turns back towards me, with a small sigh "Why do you even bother....he gave you that?"

I tossed the skirt aside and walked out of the room. Huo Qu Bing picked up the umbrella and walked beside me. My heart is colder than the snow, so how could I fear this bitter cold. I hurry up "I want to walk in the snow." He doesn't say a word, just tossing the umbrella aside and walking in the snow with me.

I don't want to see anyone so I purposely walk in the dark areas. He suddenly asked me "Do you know how to make noodles?" I say no, and he replies "My estate keeps the kitchen fires on at night. Big dishes we can't make right now, but a bowl of noodles can be produced." Hong Gu is strict so the fires are turned off at night, so I nod and follow him.

I stare at the bowl of noodles and eat a few bites. I tried to smile and chat with Huo Qu Bing, but my tears start to fall. It falls into the soup, drops and drops of it. I hurry to pick up the bowl and eat the noodles with big bites.

Huo Qu Bing pretends he doesn't see and keeps talking. I ask "Any alcohol?" and he gets up and grabs two bottles. Along with it, he brought a towel. He doesn't look at me, and just keeps his eyes trained outside the window, looking at the snow falling in the darkness, drinking his wine.

I'm half awake and I can already smell the fragrance. When I'm fully awake, I realize that there are two silver scented heat balls hanging over the bed. This room is luxuriously appointed, and I immediately recall that I must've gotten drunk and passed out at the Huo Estate. Looking at the silver balls, I suddenly miss Brother Wolf. Right now I can only alleviate my pain and exhaustion by putting my arms around his neck.

A maid calls out if I'm awake, and I hear Huo Qu Bing outside. He walks in "Don't lay in bed all day, it's past noon, any lazier and you won't be able to sleep tonight."

I lay there not moving and he sits down next to me on the pallet "Head hurting?" I touched my head and wonder "No, usually it hurts when I get drunk, but not today. What kind of wine did we drink last night?"

"What different wine? It's the fragrant silver balls above your head. I had the physician put some medicinal herbs in there for you."

The maid was waiting there for me, so I sigh and get up. I can't hide forever, the day keeps going on "I'm getting up, shouldn't you give me some privacy?"

He laughed and got up "Lazy cat. Move faster because I'm hungry. Any later and you'll only have table scraps to eat."

.....

I reach my hand out to play with the baby Liu Bo, who grabs me with his soft chubby finger, cooing back at me. I laugh and ask why he's laughing? After he's carried away by the nanny, I sit and talk with Li Yan. She teases that Liu Bo should call me auntie but I don't dare joke around like this. I confirm she's feeling better, and she asks if something happened between me and Shi Enterprises. I don't answer and change the topic, congratulating her on the news that Li Cai, Li Gan's uncle, has become the new Prime Minister. Her face doesn't move but she murmurs a soft thanks.

As I walk out, she suddenly asks me to help her. I reply "From the day I helped you into the Palace, I already told you I cannot help you within the Palace." She doesn't believe me "You're lying. Everything you do is calculated, I just don't know what you are planning."

I don't respond, because my original plan was wrong, and now I have no plan at all left. Li Yan finally asks that I never oppose her. While Empress Wei has the Great General Wei as her brother, Li Yan has no one to help her in the Palace. She wishes I were her real sister, so she wouldn't have to walk this road all alone. I look at her "You can relax. Nothing I do in the future will concern you, and I won't block your way."

She nods "You must always remember what you just said."

Before heading out, I stop "Li Yan, take good care of yourself. Read some medical books and learn to regulate your own health. The lonelier you are, the more you need to take care of yourself." She thanks him, she will do this because she has a son now.

After leaving Li Yan's chambers, I run into Huo Qu Bing. I bow to him. We head off, but I purposely walk three steps behind him. He turns to me "You are this careful in the Palace?" I remind him "You and I have different positions, if people saw us walking side by side, it would just lead to chatter." He looked annoyed and I explained further "I know you don't give a damn about this stuff, and have people who let you get away with it, but it's better to be safe and leave yourself some room for escape in any situation."

He huffed "Seeing the way you restrict yourself annoys me. In the future, don't come to the Palace unless you have to." I laugh "Have you been busy recently? Since the New Year, it's been two months since I've seen you."

His face lit up "I'm playing for big stakes this time, of course I need to prepare. Oh right, are you going back to Xi Yu or not?" I hesitated "I don't know." He was livid "You don't know? He's already this way.....and you, you still....you, you..." He was stomping away but turned back around and pointed at me. I stood there just looking back at him. He suddenly shook his head and took off, like he wanted to shake all the unpleasantness away "I think you're a masochist, just itching to be mistreated. Yet I'm even worse of a masochist than you, simply dying to be mistreated!"

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The gardener checks on the vines, telling me it's not sprouted by now, it's likely dead. He wanted to buy new ones for me but I say it's not necessary. A guest arrives, and it's Housekeeper Chen from the Huo Estate. He bowed to me and explained "Since the young master has been so busy recently, he's rarely home and can't find the time to come. He wanted me to tell you that he's leaving for Xi Yu tomorrow at dawn." I thanked him, while he gave me a warm twinkling smile.

After dinner, I return to my room and sit there in a daze, not sure what I'm thinking about. I lit the lamp and took out a small brazier. From the chest I removed all the diary cloths. It makes me smile, but then I know that sometimes all the hopes and hard work still only ends up with heartbreak. I toss the first cloth in the fire, letting it burn in a bright red blaze. I continue to read each entry and then burn it. I burn a few more before I stop, deciding that since I wrote these for him, might as well let him read it now. Nothing left to lose, and a way to end this for good.

I pick up the gold jade earrings and put it in the chest. I pick up the Xiang Fei Zhu flute and play a few notes. I'm cleaning up the things related to you. If only I could clean up my heart the way I'm cleaning up this room, easily throwing things out, perhaps there would be less sorrow and anger in this world.

I wander outside the Shi Estate for awhile before vaulting over. Outside the Bamboo Residence, I leave the chest at the door. After some time, I start playing the flute. The light suddenly turns on inside and the door opens. Jiu Ye stands there on his crutch. In the dark, his face is white with shock. I finish playing three times before I stop. I tell him "You once said that I was not suited to play the Bai To Ying tune because it was so sorrowful. Today I finally understand. With my emotions connecting with the tune, I should have played it well. But I wish I could never play it well, that I would never understand its meaning."

At the end, I control myself, and with a hard clean snap, I've broken the flute in half. Before the broken halves of the flute have even hit the ground, I've vaulted on the roof. I hesitate for a moment but it is still silence below. I shake my head and fly forward, completely and utterly given up.

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Hong Gu,

I'm gone. When you find this letter you will be furious. Please don't be angry, which will just give you more wrinkles. I'm giving you all the businesses I run in Chang An. You must remember that the dancing business, you need to teach the girls well and treat them well. You might want to close down some of the businesses, or at least not expand anymore, and just protect what you already have. Burn this letter after reading it. I have left another detailed business plan for you. I know I'm being immature, but I've tried hard to be a Chang An person since coming here. I try to control my words and actions, but now I suddenly feel exhausted. I miss the freedom of my life in Xi Yu. So I'm leaving, and maybe one day I'll come back. Or maybe I'll never come back. Please don't miss me, Hong Gu. And one last thing – in 10 days to 1 month, please deliver this other letter to the Huo Estate.

Yu Er

.....

Xiao Huo,

I'm going back to Xi Yu. I'm sorry but I won't be going with you. When you see this cloth, it should be a few months later already, when you return victorious yet again to the Palace. Perhaps I will be off chasing a sheep with Brother Wolf. Or maybe doing nothing except watching the sun set over the West. You asked me, are tangled vines really how

complicated life ought to be? I thought about it, and perhaps life really is like the gold silver flower vines. But it's not about being tangled up. Flowers bloom and flowers wilt. When the gold silver flowers meet, it twists and turns, like meeting and then departing. Fate binds and fate separates, this vine is but a representation of life's many gatherings and partings. This time my decision is to turn and leave. This parting might lead to never meeting again. I wish you all the best.

Xiao Yu

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 1 - Chapter

Epilogue

Epilogue: Wishing for Twin Stars

In the dark night, she's dressed in red, like a burning flame.

Meng Jiu knew she was in a bad mood, because normally she disliked wearing vibrant colors. But when she's in a bad mood, she'll force herself to wear something bright. Like the color would tell the world that she's perfectly fine, hiding her sadness and weakness inside the bold hue.

Her eyes are filled with fire as well, giving the lonely Bamboo Residence a bit of warmth. He desperately wanted to keep the warmth by his side, but he couldn't. This woman, who came and went like the wind, her life as vibrant as the morning dew, he wanted her to always live under the bright light. He wanted her to have the most complete happiness, without a single flaw in her life.

He asked her "Do you want a family?" and she said yes. He wanted it too, but he couldn't give it to her. The fire in her eyes, was it love or hate? When she broke the flute, his heart also shattered. The look in her eyes when she looked at him, it was dead within. Did she hate him for not saying a single word? If only she knew, that he was afraid to say even one word, because then he would ask her to stay.

The red shadow disappears over the rooftop and he controls himself from calling out. His heart is in pain, and he coughs up some blood. He's been sick, and now with this emotional pain, he barely has the strength to stand. He tosses the crutch aside and sits down on the door step. He pulls the chest over and takes out cloth after cloth of her feelings for him. She knew so much more than he thought, and did so much more for him than he knew.

Reading each word, his heart started to burn, and his body felt like ice. Did he really have this happiness? He reads more and then his face suddenly lights up. He calls out for his servants and immediately heads out. The sun is barely rising from the East, like her brilliant smile. He stared at the rising sun and felt happiness and pain. Yu Er, Yu Er, I really underestimated you. I've hurt you so badly, but I will use my entire life to make it up to you. From now on, I won't let you have a single second of sadness.

The carriage arrives at Luo Yu House and already he can hear the commotion. Hong Gu is yelling at everyone for not seeing anything. He's introduced to Hong Gu, who is shocked this beautiful young man is the Big Boss. She thought to herself – that arrogant son of the Heavens Huo Qu Bing, like the brightest sun and the sturdiest oak, I thought he and Yu Er was the most perfect match in this world. But who knew there was a man like this, his pale

moon a contrast to the bright sun, neither winning out over the other.

Jiu Ye is in a rush to see Yu Er, but Hong Gu tearfully explains that she's gone, and says she won't be coming back anymore. Jiu Ye's heart jerks and he starts coughing violently. Yu Er, I knew your true feelings only after I read the clothes, and now I know how deeply you must be hurt. Hong Gu explains Yu Er's letter revealed she was headed to Xi Yu. She also left a letter for General Huo, to be delivered in a few days, but Hong Gu was so mad she sent it already to the Huo Estate.

Tian Cao immediately assures Jiu Ye that he will send people to find her, and that all of Xi Yu will be looking for her. Jiu Ye wants all the courts of the Xi Yu kingdoms notified so that their armed forces can join in the search. Tian Cao is shocked, knowing that Jiu Ye has never asked for help from those countries to keep his connection with them on the down low. He must really be determined to find Yu Er this time.

.....

It is still dark outside but Huo Qu Bing has already dressed in his armor, ready for deployment. "Did you tell her I was leaving today for war?" Housekeeper Chen confirmed that he told her personally. Huo Qu Bing stood at the front door for some time, until the sun gradually began to rise. His heart sighed, looks like she still wants to stay in Chang An. He packed up all his emotions and leaped on the horse. The sound of the horse hooves on the ground ringing through Chang An's streets.

Love and personal feelings need to be set aside for now. His mission is to focus on this war, which the entire court is waiting to see him fail. Last time he took 800 men and ambushed the Xiong Nu army base, emerging victorious. But people were still not satisfied, calling it a lucky victory. Even the Emperor remains wary, not ready to give him a full army to lead into war. Some generals spend an entire lifetime and never become a Grand Duke. He's just 18 years old and already his battle victory is renowned around the world, leaving people envious and ready to see him fail.

This time he's been given ten thousand men, as a test of his capabilities by the Emperor. Only by succeeding can he shut the traps of those scholar officials in court. Huo Qu Bing already knew he would succeed. Or more accurately, the word "failure" does not appear in his vocabulary. Anything he wants to do, he can do it, except.....

He thought of that crafty stubborn girl and he shook his head. He glanced towards Luo Yu House and his initial cold expression warmed up a bit. No, there is no except. In Huo Qu Bing's life, there is nothing he can't achieve, much less her.

After a day of travel, when he's about to rest, a letter arrives for him. It's not an army dispatch, but from Housekeeper Chen. His heart lurched and he opened it. After reading the letter, his eyes saw red. All the pain in his heart coalesced together. Yu Er, you lied to me yet again.

He stared intently at the cloth, and slowly a small icy smile appeared on his lips. This is her first letter to him, but it will not be her last letter to him. He stood up and called out of the tent "Have the two fastest horse prepared and ready to leave at any time." Yu Er, you can't possibly be harder to chase than the wily Xiong Nu?

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Ballad of the Desert - Volume 2 - Chapter 1

Chapter 17: Kidnapping

A pitch black sky blankets the earth, on the wide road there is just the sound of horse hooves reverberating. I sit in the carriage and stare towards the East, where the grand city of Chang An is becoming farther and farther from me. Some time later, the sun rises over the East, just a few slivers, but it's already brilliant, shining life on the horizon.

Slowly, in the clouds dotting the sky, a fiery explosion happens. A red round sun bursts from the flames and rises. In moments it has surrounded the vista and eliminated the darkness. There is likely nothing more astonishing than a sun rise, and I'm stunned by this view outside the window. My lingering sadness dissipates and I raise my arms with a long howl, welcoming the arrival of a new day.

My howling causes the horse to almost stumble, but the driver rights it and we continue on our way. I laugh, thankful it was just one howl, anymore and I'd be in the dirt right now with an overturned carriage. The day arrives and there are more travelers on the road, so I leave the carriage roof and go sit with the driver. He's a very hearty person, allowing me to sit there. He can tell I know martial arts, and hate being cooped up inside the carriage, so why am I not riding my own horse. I explain I've never learned to ride.

He pointed to Xiao Qian and Xiao Tao flying overhead, indicating I have a way with animals. If I practiced, he's sure I'll be a quick learner. As we head West, what was normally verdant land seems barren and run down, and I sigh about the ravages of war on the common people.

The driver sighed "Isn't that the truth. We've fought two wars with the Xiong Nu in the past year, with over ten thousand soldiers dead. How many wives lost their husbands, mothers lost their sons. Add to that a famine and money going towards war, where are the common people getting money to survive. When the battles are won, only the powerful are rewarded, and the common people continue to suffer."

I am pleased with how thoughtful he was, and he explained that he is learned and during his many travels now as a driver, he's had the chance to meet many people and hear different points of view. I ask if it's true that there has been cannibalism in the region, and he confirms it happened during the early Han dynasty history when there were deadly natural disasters.

I discuss how Emperor Qin Shi Huang built the Great Wall and sacrificed tens of thousands of men, leaving him reviled in history. But scholars now understand that without the Great Wall, the Xiong Nu would have breached the border long ago and many

more people would have died as a result. But he asks why we must suffer now for the greater good of people who come after us. He also has a point and I cannot refute it.

I ask if he knows about the story of how a Shan Yu of the Xiong Nu tribe greatly insulted Dowager Queen Lu? After the death of the first Emperor of Han dynasty Liu Bang, the Shan Yu sent a letter to Liu Bang's Queen Yu. He said that since they were both widowers, they might as well just make do as a couple for the rest of their lives. It was a grievous insult, but since the Han Empire was still in its infancy and weak at that time, Queen Lu had to swallow her outrage and shame to be thus propositioned.

Since then, the Hans have send their princesses to be married to the Xiong Nu leaders to keep the peace. The hundred years of peace was purchased by the Han at the price of their most precious daughters, as well as offerings of gold. Our Han warriors are no weaker than the Xiong Nu, why must we bow to them and continue to supplicate before them?

He sighed, lamenting that he's old now. If he heard me talk as a young man, he would immediately enlist with the Great General Wei or General Huo to go fight the Xiong Nu. I laugh it off, telling him that I was merely playing devil's advocate to what he said, and throwing some thoughts around for discussion. He commented that while I look confident, perhaps I haven't made up my mind about life. I'm just happy I have him for company on this long road to talk with.

He tells me that to get to Xi Yu, the faster route is to Dun Huang city, then passing through Long Xi, on to Xiu Zai, Zhang Ye, and finally past Xiao Ye Shi. I hear the words "Long Xi" and immediately tell him to not head there, even if we end up taking a longer way. I'll even pay him more. He agrees and we bypass Long Xi and head directly to Liang Zhou.

When we arrive at Liang Zhou it is already completely dark. We find a clean inn to spend the night, with my requirements very low except for needing hot water and a big tub to take a bath. Life in Chang An is too comfortable, so three days on the road and I'm covered in dust and feel unbearable.

After changing water twice, I finally feel relaxed and clean. There are many hot springs outside of Chang An, but in the future I won't have any hot springs to soak in. The hot springs in the Qing Estate.....don't think about it, don't think about it, forget everything in Chang An.

Suddenly there was a gust of cold air that blew into the room. I notice the door has been opened a crack "Girl, don't boil anymore water, I still have another bucket I haven't used."

The door closed with a sound. I picked up my silk sash with the gold bells and sent it flying to catch on the bucket of hot water. When the bells are released, I can't seem to pull it back. I'm perplexed, what did it get hooked on? I remember telling the serving girl to put the bucket behind the paper screen so that I can retrieve it easily. How did it get stuck? I didn't misjudge the location!

Without a choice, I decide to stop being lazy and walk over there to grab it myself. I stand up in the tub, but give the sash one more jerk for good measure. The hot water bucket doesn't fly over, and instead the entire paper screen falls over with a resounding thud.

Huo Qu Bing is standing there, dressed all in black, his figure ramrod straight. He's holding my gold bells in his hand, staring at me with an expression of frigid darkness.

I am so shocked that I stand there for a good second, before reacting and diving back into the tub with a horrified yelp. I was just thinking the water was getting cold, but now my body is on fire.

Thank god I asked for an extra deep tub earlier, so now with my body submerged it's not as likely to be revealing anything. I huddle in the tub and stare wide-eyed at him.

His expression remains the same, his eyes staring directly at me without blinking. That kind of coldness, even across this distance I can feel the frost radiating from him. All my shame disappears under the piercing gaze of his frigid stare.

He's really angry this time. No, He's really, really, really angry this time. The angrier the other person is, the more I need to remain calm. When the enemy has the advantage, one can't upset him more. Otherwise I don't even know where to look to collect my bones.

I swallowed and forced myself to be calm "Don't insult my vanity. Under these circumstances, you ought to have a man's normal reaction. Either look at me lasciviously like a pervert, or try to be a gentleman and pretend to look elsewhere."

His expression still remains unchanged, just giving me one more icy glare before he suddenly threw the gold balls towards my head. I'm afraid to catch it with my bare hands, so I grab a robe from next to me and send it flying towards the gold balls. In the air the two form a Z, and I manage to defuse the velocity with which Huo Qu Bing threw it at me. If his strength is correlated to his anger, this time he's extremely mad.

After I retrieve the gold balls, I realize that the robe I grabbed was my night clothes. I lose my pretend cool and hurriedly pull the robe into the water, and I huddle even deeper inside the tub. The water has turned cold, the clothes are next to me, but I can't put it on. I can only stick my head out of the tub and look around, finally giving Huo Qu Bing a pitiful look.

His sarcasm is biting "You want me to have the normal male reaction, why don't you have the normal female reaction when a woman is caught in the bath by a man?"

Did he not think I was embarrassed? I was afraid of making him even more furious so I suppressed it, but now it comes right back out "Are you sure you want me to have the normal female reaction? You won't stab me in the back afterwards?"

"It doesn't feel good to stay in the cold water, does it?" He smirked.

I look at him, and suddenly start screaming "Help!.....Help!.....There is a peeping tom.....a peeping tom....."

His looked stunned and his eyes are finally not just reflecting icy coldness. "Now you should have the normal reaction" I pointed my finger at the window "Under these circumstances, you ought to be escaping through there."

Footsteps sound on the hallway outside and get closer. "Where is the peeping tom?" "The sound came from the inside room." "But a 40 year old woman is staying there" "How do you know a peeping tom might not like an older flower" "Yeah, some might like my experienced allure, and what do you mean I'm 40?" "Stop arguing, we need to help the girl, a young one is staying inside so we should kick the door in." "But if we kick the door in, we're no better than a peeping tom, let's knock first."

I inadvertently laughed, the He Xi people are so different than the Chang An people. These folks are just like the cutest wolves in the wolf pack. Huo Qu Bing's expression is weird and then he walks straight towards me. Before I can scream, he pulled me right out of the tub. My body is wrapped in a towel and then completely enclosed by a blanket.

I'm angry, and frustrated, and embarrassed and I rage "You're shameless!"

The noise outside the door quiets. But before the door is kicked in, Huo Qu Bing does behave like a normal person ought to in this instance, and he jumps out of the window. But I'm not sure if carrying me as he jumped was normal or not?

The moment he left the inn, a soldier immediately walked up to him. Based on his dress, it's not a low ranking soldier either. He averts his eyes, pretending that he's not seeing or hearing the me that is heaved over Huo Qu Bing's shoulder and currently screaming obscenities at him. He respectfully said "General, these are the two fasted mounts in Liang Zhou."

Huo Qu Bing swings on the horse and tucks me into his arms. I stopped yelling at him, worriedly asking "Where are you going?"

"Going back to Long Xi. By dawn we should be able to take a bath and be relaxed eating breakfast on the streets of Long Xi." He replied.

"Are you insane? I'm not going to Long Xi. My bags are at the inn, and my Xiao Tao and Xiao Qian. Let me go." I squirm in the blanket like a silk worm, trying to sit straight so I can argue with him.

"Someone will deliver your bags. I'm in a rush so I have no time to mess around with you. If you don't behave, I'm going to knock you out. You choose. Stay awake or get knocked out?"

His words are icy cold and hard as a rock, he is clearly not joking. I quieted for some time before looking for another avenue out "I'm not comfortable like this. I want to stick my arms out."

"I'm quite comfortable with you like this. Your arms are better behaved in the blanket. If you're comfortable, that will mean I'm uncomfortable."

"Huo Qu Bing, you are a horrible lascivious shameless....."

.....
"Did you hear me? I called you a pervert. You're also a.....a jackass.....and a.....muttonhead...." I threw out every single insulting phrase I had ever learned in Chang An.

.....
When you are facing a brick wall, insulting and trying to punch it, but the brick wall has no reaction, in the end the end it's myself that gets tired. I wearily and docilely rest in his embrace. The horse slowed down "I need to change horses" and before his words finished, he had jumped off one horse and onto another.

I was shocked "When you came, did you change horses like this?" "Yes." "Aren't you tired? Even the new horse is tired." "When chasing the Xiong Nu army through the desert, not sleeping for three days and three nights is not uncommon. Chasing you is easier than

chasing the Xiong Nu.”

I wondered “How did you get the news so fast?” He explained “Don’t forget that you are still in Han territory, and there are a lot of army bases in the He Xi region. Housekeeper Chen sent the fastest courier to bring your letter, which arrived in my hands that very evening. Tracking you took a bit of time, otherwise it wouldn’t have even taken three days.”

“That damn Hong Gu, not listening to my orders.” “She hasn’t even berated you, and you are yelling at her? How can a general desert the army, that is a capital offense.”

“I’m tired” and I brazenly tried to change the subject. “Close your eyes if you’re tired, you’ll be able to sleep well tomorrow” and he adjusted my position so that I was leaning on him more comfortably.

“This isn’t comfortable, I can’t fall asleep.” “You’re obviously not tired enough, if you were, you would be able to sleep even when riding a horse.” “Have you slept like that before?” “Yes.” “You won’t fall asleep right now?” “No.” “That’s fine. I don’t care if you tumble off a horse, just don’t let me suffer.” “Relax and sleep” His voice was calm, no longer angry or furious.

I huffed at him. Even though it wasn’t comfortable, I actually nodded off. It was almost sunrise when we arrived at Long Xi. He just tossed me on a carpet and left without saying a word. Ay, he’s still angry!

My body is sore, but I have no time to pity myself. I start plotting how to escape. The key is how to sneak away under Huo Qu Bing’s watchful eyes. Once I enter the desert, I will become like a speck of sand. No matter the person, no one can find me.

I rolled around on the ground and managed to untie the outer sash. I dragged the blanket around looking for something to wear, but there was nothing. No wonder he just tossed me down and left. I was hopping around like a rabbit when he returned. He had bathed and changed, though it was still all black. The somber color on him looks wild and powerful, making him even more handsome.

Is this man made out of steel? From Liang Zhou to Long Xi round trip and he doesn’t look remotely tired. I stare at him “Are you giving me clothes to wear?”

He tossed a package on the pallet and then walked out without a word. Why was it a set of black men’s clothes? It even came with a white cloth to bind my chest. I railed at him for knowing even this. Even though this isn’t ideal, having something to wear is better than nothing. I sigh and start to dress.

It’s my first time wearing male attire, but I managed to put it on correctly. I walk around a few times and find myself rather charming. Huo Qu Bing has pulled open the door flap and is laughing at me “Fix your hair first before you start preening” reminding me that my hair is a mess.

Even though I can plait beautiful braids, I’ve never done a male hairstyle before. After trying for some time, I still can’t do it properly. Huo Qu Bing, who has been sitting behind me this entire time watching me, suddenly starts laughing. I violently use my hairbrush to hit his reflection in the mirror. If I can’t hit him, hitting his reflection takes out some of my

anger.

He suddenly took the hairbrush from me, and before I can ask why, he's already grabbed my hair and started combining the mess I made. His touch is gentle as he fixes my hair. Looking at the two of us in the mirror, this image seems so familiar. Many years ago, there was also a man who loved me that carefully brushed my hair and taught me to braid it. My nose started reddening and tears came to my eyes. I lowered my head and stared at the ground, letting him fix my hair and secure it with a jade circlet.

"There is still some time, I'll take you to the streets of Long Xi to walk around and grab a bite." He lightly said and didn't wait for my response before walking out.

I ask if the chef in the army base isn't good? "Any chef who cooks for me is the best in the Palace, but the little local Xi Yu dishes you like isn't his specialty." I take a few steps and suddenly grab his arm "Is Li Gan at this base?" He stared at me "He's not here" and I'm relieved and let go of his arm. "What exactly did you do to Li Gan that makes you so guilty around him?" I retort "Nothing, I didn't do anything to him that I need to feel guilty about."

He looked at me but didn't continue. As I walked, I continuously checked out the army base set up. Huo Qu Bing casually drawled "You seem to be quite energetic. Why don't you think about what you want to eat. If I wake up tomorrow and can't find you, I will order that every single army commanded by me change its food source to wolf meat. I will also request that all Xi Yu kingdoms and their citizens use wolf meat to welcome the Han army."

I angrily spit out "You wouldn't dare!"

He calmly said "Try me."

I glare at him but he doesn't seem to mind, instead smiling and walking forward. I continue to bore holes in his back. He walked further but didn't turn around, though his footsteps seem to slow. It's dawn and the Spring wind is mild. His figure, dressed in all black, doesn't seem to fit with the Spring light, giving off a sense of isolation.

My heart softened and I hurried to catch up to him. When he heard my footsteps, he didn't stop or turn around, but suddenly his figure seemed to blend into the warm Spring light. Even though I'm much shorter than him, but we're still taller than most people walking on the streets. We're suitable to be deemed dashing young men. Perhaps it's my brilliant smile, and the contrast to his icy cold look, but all the ladies and girls keep staring at me. I smile when I meet their eyes, the older ones smiling back and the younger ones averting their eyes with a blush.

Strolling on the street, I'm having a great time. If Chang An was a place where people were open, then Xi Yu is a place where people are bold. A flower girl threw a bouquet of plum blossoms in my arms, causing everyone to laugh and tease her. I remember that I'm pretending to be a man, so I bow to the flower girl. Huo Qu Bing, who is still poker faced next to me, tosses some money to the flower girl. She huffs and throws it back to him "Who wants your money? That was my gift to that gentleman."

It was likely the first time someone has angrily thrown money back at Huo Qu Bing, so he's startled for a moment. The crowd chides him for not understanding the Long Xi

people's warmth. I drag Huo Qu Bing away and check out a few places before sitting down to eat. I see the forty-some lady owner and ask her for two bowls of fish noodles, but I call her big sister. She looks shocked and then pleased, smiling even more broadly when I give her the plum blossom bouquet. After we ate, Huo Qu Bing tried to pay but she refused to accept, saying she can afford to treat me to two bowls of fish noodles.

Since leaving the army base, Huo Qu Bing hasn't said anything to me, but suddenly he starts to laugh "I never knew you had the ability to eat free food." I proudly smile back at him.

He continues "You look like a boy when dressed like one, even when you walk you don't resemble a girl. I can relax and let you stay in the army base, you can be my personal bodyguard."

I sass back "You need to be careful. If you upset me, I can turn into your assassin at anytime."

"Is Long Xi fun?" he asks, and I answer it's fun. "If it's fun, then it was worth coming. Can you stop being mad now?" I wearily reply "The legs are on my body, leaving is bound to happen. How long are you going to keep me here?"

He was silent for a moment "Until you lose all hope and don't want to leave, or until I give up. Then I might let you go....or I might never let you go."

I angrily kick the ground and shook my sleeve at me before stomping away. A Xiong Nu man was selling knives on the side of the street, in an area that is sparsely populated, and he's not being very loud in soliciting customers. I was about to walk past when my eyes lit on something he was selling. I immediately turned back and he saw me staring at a knife. He put what he considered a good knife in front of me, but I just pick up a very uniquely designed knife. It was exactly like the knife I played with as a child. I ask him "Where did you get this knife?"

He stuttered and tried to explain in broken Han that he got it from someone, who got it from someone else. I sighed. During the commotion back then, who knew which guard got a hold of it and thus it passed out of the court. So many years later, through so many different hands, it's back in mine. I ask how much to buy it, but he keeps wanting to sell me a better knife. Huo Qu Bing impatiently just tosses money at him, more than what he thinks it is worth. I tell the seller that this knife is worth much much more than that, so he should keep the money.

Most people would only see this intricately designed knife with a dull blade and think it is just a lady's accessory. But they don't know that it was a custom knife maker who was the best in the Xiong Nu world who crafted it. Years ago, the Crown Prince of the Xiong Nu summoned that man, who used all his skill, to make this knife.

I clicked on a trap button in the knife, and then remember my anger from last night, so I raise my head towards Huo Qu Bing and huff "Let's see if you dare be mean to me again!" before stabbing the knife into my chest. The knife seller gasped and Huo Qu Bing's face lost every ounce of color. He wrenched me forward but it was already too late. The entire knife was buried in my chest and all he could do was hold my collapsed body in his arms.

I snuck a peek at him, wanting to scare him for a bit longer, but his hands, his entire body,

was shaking, and the trembling actually made my heart hurt. I hurriedly got up and pulled the knife out with a giggle. When my hand touched the knife tip, it completely retracted into the handle. “Did you suddenly turn into a moron? It’s not like you haven’t killed a person before. When the knife enters the heart, how could there be no blood?” He stared at me and then roared “I am indeed a moron!” before turning around and storming off.

I ran after him “Please don’t be mad. My mischievous side suddenly came out so I wanted to joke around with you.” He refused to talk to me and continued to walk quickly, so I just followed behind him continuing to apologize. But he wouldn’t even turn to look at me.

If he wasn’t so concerned about me, with his battlefield experience, how could he not have seen that it was a joke? I remembered how pale his face looked and I feel really terrible and guilty. I softly explained “I know you’re not mad that I was joking around with you. You’re mad that I took a risk with my life to play that joke. What if the knife hadn’t work liked I expected?” I sighed “This knife was a gift for me from a childhood friend. I used it to scare my Papa, how could I not recognize it? There is also a compartment inside that an hide fresh blood, so when you stab it in your heart, blood gushes out and makes it look real. When I saw the knife back there, all I could think of was my childhood, and my naughty personality from back then came back out. I can’t believe so many years later, I actually found a childhood toy on the street.”

Perhaps it was the first time he had ever heard me talk about my childhood, so Huo Qu Bing’s expression warmed a bit “You had a Papa?” I played with the knife in my hand “Did you think I was born this way? Of course I had a Papa who raised me.”

He was silent and then said “Having a father, sometimes its like not having a father.” I knew he was thinking of his birth father Huo Chong Ru, who got his mother Wei Shao Er pregnant out of wedlock which resulted in Huo Qu Bing. He refused to marry her and wed another woman. Huo Qu Bing grew up without a father, and until after Wei Zhi Fu married the Emperor that his mother was married to Chen Jang and became Mrs. Chen. It was then Huo Qu Bing had a father in name. I tried to change the subject and started chattering about this and that with respect to this knife. When I saw his face ease, only then did I relax.

When we returned to the base, he asked “Want to catch up on sleep?” I shook my head, I wasn’t sleepy anymore. He led me to the stables and a fourteen year old boy soldier came out with a horse “Li Cheng might be young but he is a skilled rider. You need to quickly learn to ride from him.”

I furrowed my brows “Not learning.” He furrowed his brows and silently stared at me.

Suddenly the sound of thunderous clapping reached us. He still stared at me silently, and I stared right back at him. The clapping got more and more urgent, and he finally sighed. He leaped on the horse and took off. I quizzically asked Li Cheng “Why did he take off?”

He looked at me like I was an idiot “The General has to go count the troops! In about three to four days, the army will be deploying for battle with the Xiong Nu.”

I wrinkled my nose and walked away, but Li Cheng quickly stopped me “General ordered me to teach you to ride a horse.” I retort “I’m not learning.” and want to walk around him, but he tightly grasped my arm “You must learn. If you don’t learn, I can’t fulfill my

orders.” I rolled my eyes “So? What does that have to do with me?” He was starting to sweat “If I can’t finish, the General will have a bad impression of me. Then he won’t let me on the battlefield to fight the Xiong Nu.”

I sighed and tried to get him to release me, but who knew this little pipsqueak had this much strength. He pleaded with me “How can you not know how to ride a horse? The Xiong Nu are vicious. If you can’t ride a horse, if something happened you would be in danger. You would be a burden to everyone.”

My hand was about to strike his neck when it stopped. If something happened, the first person I would burden would be Huo Qu Bing “You’re still a kid. Why are not at home and here in the army?” His face stiffened “Last Fall, the Xiong Nu came to my city and killed my parents and sister.” I was silent and then slapped his shoulder “Little teacher, let’s go learn to ride a horse. But remember not to be impatient with me, or laugh at me, or call me stupid. Otherwise beware of my fist.”

He rubbed his eyes and nodded. From morning to noon until it was pitch black, other than having lunch and a short break, I learned to ride a horse. From the horse’s back to the ground, I repeatedly alternated between those two places. In the beginning he complimented me “Brother Jin, you may look like a dandy, but you are a strong feller.”

Gradually, his expression changed from admiration to awe to shock and finally to fear. Until the end, when he cried and begged me not to ride anymore. I stumbled into the tent, where Huo Qu Bing was studying a map. He saw my ragged state, raised his eyebrows and looked at Li Cheng. The kid cried and looked at me like I was a lunatic, explaining how I was coming along in riding. After Huo Qu Bing got the update, he smiled and asked Li Cheng to prepare a bath.

When Li Cheng took off, I immediately flopped on the pallet. My bones felt like it was about to collapse, and I was so weak I almost slid right on the floor. Huo Qu Bing sat next to me and touched my bruises “Does it hurt?” I kept my eyes shut and coldly huffed “Why don’t you take a couple dozen tumbles and let me know?”

He ordered me to turn around face down. “When you learn to ride for the first time, your back and waist will be sore. I’ll massage it for you.” In thought about it and turned around “Go light, my left shoulder really hurts.”

He lightly massaged my back and softly said “Riding a horse takes time to learn, why the rush? It’s like you want to learn to ride in one day.” I humped “Who told me this morning to quickly learn to ride?” “I thought you wouldn’t do your best unless I said that.” I humped again and didn’t respond. He continued “The army leaves tomorrow.”

I sat up in shock and turned my head to look at him “Leaving tomorrow? I just learned to ride fast, I can’t even turn or stop yet. If I’m not careful I’ll fall down. But....but I guess I can try. I think I’ll use a rope and tie myself to the horse so that I won’t fall off.”

Huo Qu Bing laughed at me “Stop being so insane. Who ever heard of a newbie learning to ride fast by the first day. You’re just using your martial arts skills to let that horse run wild, because you know you won’t die. If I let you tag along with the army, you’ll splinter the brigade. You don’t need to come with me, stay here and learn slowly.”

I gave him a questioning look and flopped back on the pallet “You’re not afraid of me

running away?" He didn't answer and a soldier brought a bath in. When the soldier saw me on the pallet, he pretended he didn't see anything and quickly averted his eyes.

"Go wash! There are no maids here in the army, so just make do. If you care for it, I'd be glad to assist you." and he pulled me up. I coldly huffed at him and then sauntered over to bathe, letting down the curtains.

"Yu Er, is something wrong with your mouth lately?" I was undressing and replied "What could be wrong?" "Instead of answering, you constantly humph and huff all the time, reminding me of a certain barnyard animal."

"Humph!" I crawled into the tub and didn't bother to respond. He laughed outside "Anymore humphing, and I'll call you little piggy from now on." I comfortably laid down in the tub and closed my eyes, letting my weary bones coalesce back together.

"Yu Er, stay here in the army and wait for me to come back. I'll try my best to be fast. The quickest will be a few days, the longest will be ten days or more. I won't let you wait too long." I don't respond so he continues "I hear wolf meat is really unappetizing. I don't want to force myself to eat something disgusting."

I loudly humphed "Since you already decided, why are you asking for my thoughts?" He called my name but then a soldier arrived announcing that a package was delivered, plus a cage with two pigeons. I immediately opened my eyes, my two little ones are finally here.

"General, everything in the inn has been brought here. The two pigeons have refused food and water since last night, and when we try to force feed them, they become vicious." Those two little things, why are they that stubborn? After hearing this, I can care less about the hot water and quickly climb out to dry myself, rushing to go see them.

Huo Qu Bing said "No worries, they'll be fine when they see their owner."

"General, there is another matter. When we were leaving the inn, someone was asking around about the young lady staying in room number 2, and where she went....." The voice suddenly lowered and I tried to lean over to eavesdrop but couldn't make out what they were saying anymore.

When I heard footsteps leaving the room, I rushed out "Xiao Tao, Xiao Qian, Xiao Yu is here!"

Crouched inside their cage, Xiao Tao and Xiao Qian both quickly got up. I opened the cage and let them out, seeing their food and water are still full. I put some seeds in my hands and Xiao Tao immediately started eating. Xiao Qian cocked his head at me, as if wondering why I abandoned them. I coax him to drink first, telling them not to blame me, blame HIM. I turned to give Huo Qu Bing a glare.

Huo Qu Bing walked over to me and watched them eat "Who knew these two pigeons were so emotional and stubborn. They would rather go hungry than eat from someone else." I cleaned Xiao Tao's feathers and laughed "Of course, in this entire world, other than me and Jiu....." I stopped myself and took a deep breath, with a forced laugh "They only know me, they will not eat from anyone else."

I wish I could smile more naturally, smile like I've forgotten everything. But I know I can't, and my smile looks worse than crying. So I stop smiling and just quietly look at

Xiao Tao and Xiao Qian eating their seeds. Huo Qu Bing suddenly stood up and walked to his table and lowered his head to look at the map.

I suddenly remembered earlier and asked “When my package was delivered, what was that about someone looking for me?”

Huo Qu Bing was drawing on the map and appeared not to have heard me. I asked again, and he responded without even raising his head “When you suddenly disappeared, the driver you hired was worried about you and looking for you.” I felt touched that he would worry about me.

Xiao Qian and Xiao Tao finished eating and returned to their cage to rest. I ask Huo Qu Bing “You didn’t rest at all yesterday, and you’re leaving first thing in the morning. Aren’t you going to sleep?” He tossed his brush and stretched “I do need to get a good night’s rest, otherwise it will be after this battle before I get another chance to sleep soundly.”

I yawned “Where am I sleeping?” He pointed to the inside room “You sleep in there, I sleep out here.” He ordered the room cleared and we went to bed. Laying on the pallet, I was about to think about all the crazy things that happened to me since yesterday, but I was so exhausted I just fell asleep immediately.

Right in the middle of a great sleep, I suddenly feel someone on the pallet, startling me awake. I immediately knew who it was and I turned around, facing outward. My eyes remained closed and I asked “What time is it? You’re leaving? But the sun hasn’t even come up yet?”

His low voice murmured “I’m leaving.” In the dark, his face comes closer and closer to mine, and I can feel his warm breath. My heart starts beating faster and faster, and I’m too scared to open my eyes. I keep my eyes closed and pretend I’m still half asleep.

“If you need anything, ask Li Cheng to get it done. Don’t be in such a rush to learn to ride a horse. Stay in the army base as much as you can. If you get bored then go find ladies to flirt with in the town. But remember always wear your male clothes.” I softly agreed and he didn’t say anything else, just silently sitting there looking at me.

After awhile, he lightly stroked my head “I’m off” and he stood up and walked outside. I couldn’t help myself and called out “Huo Qu Bing.” He turned around and looked at me. I slightly raised myself off the pallet “Please be careful.”

In the darkness came a smile as brilliant as the morning sun “I definitely will!”

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 2 - Chapter 2

Chapter 18: Emotional Threads

Li Cheng was moping, muttering under his breath “How could they say leave and leave so quickly? When I woke up the entire army base was empty.”

I can see he’s in no mood to teach me to ride so I practiced by myself. I stopped being so impatient and slowly got acquainted with the horse by trotting. I ended not falling off once, but after the morning was gone, Li Cheng was still sitting on the ground looking depressed.

I jumped off and walked over to talk with him, but he was so down that he answered once for my every ten questions. “Must you seek revenge?” He nodded, if he didn’t kill the Xiong Nu to avenge his family, then his life is meaningless. I stare at him, yet another person seeking revenge for the death of a loved one. “Little teacher, if you spar with me, and in one hundred strokes you don’t lose, then I promise to beg the General to take you along on the next battle.”

He raised his head “A real man makes good on his promises, right?”

I solemnly nod my head and he immediately gets up. He pulls out his sword and faces me. I make a stance “Will the Xiong Nu wait for you to attack?” and he immediately rushes me with his sword raised. My martial arts, if I was sparring with another person, I’ll likely lose. But if it was a life and death situation, the opponent will likely die. The wolf pack has the ability only to kill its prey, so everything I learned is used to kill. My attacks are extremely vicious, aimed at using the least amount of time to kill the opponent. Because of that, I have never really tested my martial arts skills, this being the first time.

In the beginning he was somewhat hesitant, but after I almost wrenched his elbow off, he stopped holding back and every attack became deadly vicious as well. After the fifty-first stroke, I aim for his eyes and then sweep him off his feet, his sword flying out. I clap my hands and crouch down “If I used a little bit more strength, your arm would be useless. The Xiong Nu would never hold back their strength.”

He didn’t say another word, just picking up his sword and attacking me again. I smile, this boy can be taught. There is no politeness on the battlefield. After six days, all I do is learn riding and spar with Li Cheng. He is very persistent. One time I punched him on the nose and he ignored his bloody nose and tears, continuing to hack at me. His last sword thrust actually sliced my sleeve. But he still only lasted eighty-seven strokes before I punched him out cold.

In six days time, Huo Qu Bing's army left Long Xi, and using the fastest imaginable speed and distance, quickly surrounded the enemy's flank and rear. The battle is swift and fierce. In a short six days, Huo Qu Bing's army is like the most devastating wind storm in the desert, swallowing up five Xiong Nu tribes, capturing and killing multiple officials and royal family members. In total, he killed or captured over eighty thousand Xiong Nu, allowing the Xiong Nu's most beautiful mountain region the Yen Zhi Mountains to fall into the hands of the Han Empire. The Han expansion continues westward.

The Xiong Nu's most revered speed army forces are no match for Huo Qu Bing's army, and in his first foray as a General, he's struck a major blow for the Xiong Nu. But the cost of this victory is steep indeed, with ten thousand men setting out and only three thousand returning. But this is the first time the Han army has used a swift attack formation against the Xiong Nu's typical swift attack, and it was a complete victory for the Hans. It was the first time an agricultural culture has battled a nomadic culture on horseback and emerged victorious. It may not remain the only time, but this was indeed the first such time in history.

I sit in the tent and hear the roaring cheers in the base. With this victory, the Emperor is sure to heavily reward everyone in the army, but right now those who returned alive are just happy to be here. The door opened and Huo Qu Bing was standing before me. He was covered in dirt and dust, his face completely exhausted. But his eyes were twinkling with joy. I smile and stand up "I thought you would go to the celebratory feast first!"

He didn't say a word but continued to smile warmly towards me. I avoid his eyes and try to be casual "I'm sure in seven days you haven't gotten off the horse. Go bathe first!"

Before I finished talking, he has collapsed on the pallet. I was so frightened that I went to assist him. He grabbed my hand and drowsily murmured "I'm spent. Even if the sky falls down I've got to sleep first." and with that, he was passed out.

I tried to withdraw my hand but before I can retract it, he gripped it even tighter. I softly sighed and sat down next to him. Under his black robe are traces of blood, and there are a lot of tears and slashes on his sleeve. There is a strange odor, and I sniff him to smell horse sweat mixed with the scent of blood. I immediately pull my nose back.

I pull a blanket to cover him, looking at him with a heart full of worry. From when the sun was in the middle of the sky until it was pitch black out, he slept like a dead pig, not moving a muscle. I tried to jerk my hand out of his, but in his sleep he actually slapped my other hand away. I now believe what he said about sleeping while riding a horse. He can probably sleep and kill the enemy at the same time.

Finally I can't stand it anymore, and lay down on the carpeted ground next to the pallet. I pull a corner of the blanket over me, but the horrible odor bothers me so I grab a scented handkerchief and put it over my face. That calms me down and I fall asleep.

The moment Huo Qu Bing takes the handkerchief from my face, I've already woken up. The tent is filled with brilliant sunlight, and I'm faced with an even more brilliant smiling face. I was a little startled and I kept staring at him.

"Haven't seen me in awhile, did you miss me?" His one hand was still holding my hand, and his other one was holding the handkerchief and he was using the handkerchief to

tickle my face. I slap the handkerchief away “The moment you return I have to sleep on the ground. I must be sick in the head to miss you!”

“This is a huge pallet, why didn’t you just sleep on here?” and he was pulling me up there. I push him away “Keep dreaming!”

As we were pushing and pulling, my head landed on his shoulder and I smelled him again. I covered my nose “I beg of you, Master Huo, stop goofing around. You are stinking to high heaven. Hurry up and take a bath. I had to suffer your stink all last night.”

He lifted his arm and sniffed “I stink? How come I don’t smell it? You smell more carefully again, I think you made a mistake.” and he shoved his arm under my nose. I tried to hide while yelling at him “You’re doing this on purpose.”

In the pushing and pulling, he fell off the pallet with a hearty laugh. I wasn’t able to avoid him so he landed right on top of me. Suddenly the atmosphere between us changed immediately. The both of us turned silent. He stared at me, and his breathing became heavier. I want to avert my eyes but all I can do is stare right back at him. My heartbeat quickens. His face slowly descends and my body tightens. Right when his lips are about to touch mine.... “Brother Jin, aren’t you going to practice riding today? AHHH!.....” Li Cheng let out a horrified scream and immediately jumped right out of the tent and ran away. As he was closing the door, his voice shook “I didn’t see anything, I really didn’t see anything.....”

The second the door closed, I was released from the thrall and I immediately turned my face away. My cheek appeared to just brush past Huo Qu Bing’s lips. Huo Qu Bing angrily punched the ground and then said with a smile “Yu Er, you can’t keep ignoring it.” [He means this attraction between them, not necessarily the almost-kiss.]

I can’t figure out what I’m feeling so I just shove him without saying a word. He got up while I continued to lay on the ground and stare at the ceiling.

Huo Qu Bing laughed “I’m off to take a bath. When I come back, I’ll assess how your riding lessons have come along. It shouldn’t disappoint me.”

After he had been gone for some time, it was like I finally got my soul back, getting up and washing. After I splashed cold water on my face, I felt more alert. But I buried my face in the towel, my emotions a jumbled mess.

“Brother Jin” Li Cheng cautiously called out to me. I turned around and he was quite down “After breakfast, let’s go riding.” As he ate breakfast, he warily looked at me “Brother Jin, if you are feeling down, we don’t have to go riding today.”

I raised my head to look at him, and suddenly realized what he was probably thinking in his head. I almost spit out my steamed bun, causing me to cough a few times. I slapped him on the head “What is a kid like you thinking about! You need to focus on learning martial arts instead of thinking random thoughts.”

He rubbed his head, pitying himself, with his eyes wide-open, his nose all bent out of shape and his mouth re-arranged, face all swollen, giving me a sympathetic look.

I was afraid of choking so I stopped eating, making an effort to smile extra wide, wondering how to get rid of this kid’s shadowy thoughts. “That was all a

misunderstanding earlier. The General's martial arts is nowhere as bad as yours. We were well-matched in sparring. During the fight, we accidentally fell on the ground, and that is when you walked in on us and misunderstood."

It's so easy to hookwink a kid and Li Cheng immediately brightened up. He continued eating and was hollering about how he was going to spar with me today. When Huo Qu Bing arrived, we had just taken the horses out. He saw how lively I was, and how beaten up Li Cheng was, and couldn't help himself and asked "When I ordered him to teach you to ride, even if you weren't happy about it, there was no need to beat the crap out of him?"

I smirked and didn't answer, but Li Cheng quickly replied "Brother Jin is teaching me martial arts, he wasn't beating me up."

Huo Qu Bing shot me a shocked look "Teaching martial arts? If all the teachers taught this way, then no one would dare learn martial arts."

I slapped the horse and got on "This is the only method I know how to teach, letting him learn when he is facing life or death. There are no strokes, just learning how to kill the opponent with one shot." Huo Qu Bing laughed and got on a horse, telling Li Cheng "You don't need to teach today, go get some rest!"

Li Cheng said yes, and I told him to go find the older brothers who have just returned from battle and ask to fight them. They are all surely still itching to fight and will make great sparring partners. He happily ran off.

Huo Qu Bing and I rode side by side "Are you raising a baby wolf? Be careful he doesn't get his legs broken by my wolves." I giggled "I already warned him! Great sparring partners means he ought to have the understanding he might get the tar beaten out of him. He might turn from a baby swollen pig head into a big swollen pig head."

Huo Qu Bing laughed "I was just thinking what good luck he had, that you were willing to teach him. Now I think it was his bad luck to run into you." I glared at him "Both his parents died by the hands of the Xiong Nu, did you know that?"

He answered "No, I didn't. There are so many soldiers here I can't possibly know their life stories. I am only concerned whether they are capable. I found this kid to teach you to ride at the recommendation of Zhao Puo Nu." I explain that I promised Li Cheng that if he could withstand one hundred strokes from me, I will endeavor to get him on the battlefield. Huo Qu Bing replied "The way you are teaching him, he ought to get on the battlefield. But first, let's look at your riding skills these past few days" and then he kicked his horse and was off.

I was eager to show off my improvement to him, so I hurried to catch up to him. But he wasn't trying to race me on speed, instead turning left and right, and then making a U-turn. Try as I might, I couldn't keep up with him, with each turn pissing off my horse so that I almost got thrown a few times.

When fighting Li Cheng I'm totally in control, but a few runs with him and I'm covered in sweat. While he was perfectly composed, only smiling at me. Not being able to show off to him left me depressed and I dejectedly jumped off the horse and sat on the ground. He sat next to me "You're riding very well. The improvement in the last few days far exceeded my expectations." I gave him a disbelieving look and he laughed "I'm not trying

to make you feel better, I'm being serious."

I couldn't help but smile a tad. "Yu Er, tomorrow I have to take some troops back to Chang An." My smile immediately disappeared and I rested my head on my knee, moping and staring at the ground. "Don't worry, I won't force me you return to Chang An with me. But you can't secretly run back to the desert either. Aren't you teaching Li Cheng martial arts? Keep practicing your riding and I'll be back as soon as possible."

I didn't say anything and he sat there quietly. Suddenly the horse whined and broke our silence. Huo Qu Bing laughed "You ought understand now the joy of riding. Forcing you to learn is not just hoping that one day you can ride and roam the world with me. But it's believing that you surely will love riding like the wind. I don't want your life to miss out on this pleasure." He pulled me up "Come, let me teach you my secret horse riding skills."

It was the middle of the night and I was sleeping soundly, when suddenly I felt a body slip under the blanket with me. I was about to rage and use my elbow to poke his stomach when Huo Qu Bing quickly pulled me into his embrace. He enveloped my struggling body and lowly whispered "Yu Er, I'm not intending anything. I'm leaving tomorrow, and I just want to lay here and rest for a little bit. Don't kick me, I'll just lay on the pallet and I won't touch you."

I thought for a moment and then quieted down. He let me go and moved away. I scooted inside and opened up more room on the pallet for him. He whispered "Thank you" and then slid a bamboo stick into my hand. "What is this? Why does it feel like a fortune telling stick?"

"It is a fortune telling stick. It's the very one you asked for."

My heart lurched, remembering that day when I threw the stick away. And I immediately remember him standing under the acacia tree, not moving. He actually went back and found the stick. My heart filled with this soreness and hurt, and in the pain there was this odd warmth and comfort. The pain quickly subsided, so that I couldn't immediately understand what I was feeling, and where these feelings came from.

"The words on the fortune telling stick are: the vast silver desert, chasing love wishing for twin stars; the unending yellow sand, burying the shadow of sadness."

I thought about it but couldn't understand the meaning. Is it about me hoping for twin stars, and ending up with only a shadow of sadness? I though the first verse applied to Huo Qu Bing, but I couldn't understand the second verse. I didn't want to overthink it "The fortune telling sticks are forever filled with these nebulous statements."

He said "I just had a nightmare, a dream that when I returned from Chang An, I couldn't find you. I rode a horse without stopping, but I couldn't find you. Yu Er, can you promise me, now matter what happens, please don't just leave. Wait for me to return."

In the darkness, his eyes were missing his usual arrogance and confidence, and in its place was uncertainty. He was quietly looking at me, and didn't force me and didn't beg me. His emotions were crystal clear, just revealing his longing. It made my heart hurt, and before I could think it through, the words were already out of my mouth "In the future, I will never leave without a word. Even if I leave, I will say goodbye to you properly."

He smiled “I will make it so that you will never want to part from me.”

This guy, you give him an inch, he takes a foot. I coldly huffed and turned my back to him “Oh right! When you return to Chang An, don’t tell anyone where I am.” He was silent for some time “Anyone?” I thought of Li Yan, Hong Gu and those folks “Yes.” He agreed. I turned my head to him “It’s almost dawn, you should try to get more sleep.”

He smiled, nodded his head and then closed his eyes. I also closed my eyes, but my mind couldn’t rest. If Li Yan knew I was with Huo Qu Bing, maybe she will destroy Luo Yu House immediately. I thought I could just leave a few letters and then jump out of the pit of fire that was the mess of politics in Chang An. But life really is like the complicated vines Huo Qu Bing mentioned, it’s not something I can just turn my back on and forget everything.

My mind was still churning so I didn’t know when I fell asleep. When I woke up, the pallet beside me was empty. I don’t know if his movements were light as feather, or I slept that soundly, but I didn’t know when he left. I touched the place where he laid and sat there in a daze.

.....

“One hundred!” Li Cheng tossed his sword aside and collapsed on the ground in exhaustion. I wrinkled my brow at him “If you don’t want to die before you reach the battlefield, go patch yourself up now.” He smiled at me before leaving “One hundred strokes, Brother Jin. You make good on your promise.”

I smiled and nodded “I will. Go get yourself fixed up and I’ll take you out to eat on the town tonight.” In town, I ordered a stewed chicken with dates, which made him disappointed. I thought it was already better than what they served in the base, but he said it was too light, like what a woman would eat after she gave birth. I laughed, and told him that he was lacking blood lately so this was perfect.

Two men finished eating and left, and I chanced to see the wolf brand on the bottom of their horse flanks. It looked familiar but I couldn’t place it. I ask the waiter if those two men were locals? He wasn’t sure, they appear to be retainers of a rich family, looking for a girl who was lost.

Life became simple and quiet. Everyday I sparred with Li Cheng or riding, playing with Xiao Tao and Xiao Qian, or wandering around whiling away the time. Right when I’m getting bored, Huo Qu Bing’s letter arrived.

“.....I am with General Gong Xun Aou deploying from the North, and Li Gan has also deployed this time.....” I frown “Don’t frown, he’s with his father General Li Guang, and we’re going our own ways. We likely won’t meet until the very end. Once you receive this letter, go with the courier North and we’ll meet at the Northern base.”

The courier reminded me that he was to take me to the Northern base. I sighed, agreeing to go, but requesting that I bring Li Cheng with me. I can tell the courier is nervous and tell him to relax. He tells me that not only the General tasked him with this, his own father told him that he could not fail in this mission. Turned out the courier Chen An Kang was the son of Housekeeper Chen, and of course he knew I was really a girl in disguise.

I handed him the cage and got ready to leave. During the carriage ride, I feigned sleep while Li Cheng was all excited and bugging Chen An Kang for information about the battles. Having gotten used to riding, the carriage feels especially comfortable. Before I knew it, we had arrived at the Northern base.

I had just jumped out of the carriage when I was immediately pulled into Huo Qu Bing's embrace. He whispered in a low voice "I haven't seen you in a month, I've been worried for a month. I was worried that one day I would wake up and receive a letter saying that you had left. Thank goodness you may not always tell the truth, but at least you keep your promises."

This guy seriously does whatever he wants without a care for what others might think. I try to push him off me but he holds my shoulders tight and doesn't budge. Chen An Kang has his head down, currently analyzing the soil of the Northern region with intense concentration. But Li Cheng looks stunned and stares at us with his eyes wide open.

I let out a long sigh. What lie can I concoct this time? What kind of martial arts requires embracing to practice?

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 2 - Chapter 3

Chapter 19: Pigeon Souls

The army is leaving after resting for two days. Huo Qu Bing and Gong Xun Aou discuss how to attack the Xiong Nu from both sides in tandem, while General Li Guang's army brings up the rear. In the blue black sky, there isn't a single star, just a crescent moon shining coldly on the earth. Under the sound of horse hoofs, with thousands of armor glittering, there is only unending dust before and behind me. I feel a sense of inexplicable uncertainty.

Huo Qu Bing looked at me and reached out to grab my hand "Don't worry, I won't let the Xiong Nu hurt you." I bit my lip "I'm worried about Li Cheng. Was I wrong? I don't know the cruel dangers of the battlefield. The moment he gets on that horse is life and death. It's not like having good fighting skills means survival."

Huo Qu Bing's hand is around his horse whip, his eyes look straight ahead with a coldness like the shiniest moon "If killing the Xiong Nu is his greatest wish in life, then even if he dies, it's doing something he wanted. There will be no regret. Does he want to live an ordinary life? No one can guarantee whether they will survive in a battle."

I smirked at him "That was contradictory. Didn't you just promise nothing would happen to me?" He turned and smiled at me "That is because I am Huo Qu Bing, and you are the exception."

I wrinkled my nose at him but still smiled, the worries of moments ago having dissipated. After traveling for a day and a night, the army finally sets up camp. I tried to prepare myself, but after such a long time on a horse, my hips and waist feel like it doesn't belong to me. When I heard Huo Qu Bing call for rest, my body slid off the horse and I laid down on the ground. Huo Qu Bing sat down next to me "Now you know how hard I work to earn my money? In the future don't spend it so easily."

Chen Kang An suddenly walks up and with a somber expression announces that there has been no communications with the armies led by the other generals. Huo Qu Bing asks him to keep trying to reach them, and especially not to reveal word that we have not been able to reach General Gong Xun Aou.

I thought about it, and based on my extensive reading of military texts, I know the proper response is to retreat. If the army you are coordinating an attack with suddenly disappears, plus the rear flank is also unreachable, then this battle is a mess before it has even started. Huo Qu Bing paced a few times and told me to get some rest and not think too much. He actually laid down and went to sleep.

That confused me so. He wasn't thinking of what to do under these circumstances. But then I thought about it some more and decided that if he wasn't freaking out, I shouldn't be either. If the sky fell he would be the first person hit. I curled up and went to sleep.

Before the sun even rises the army is ready to leave. There is still no word from Li Guang or Gong Xun Aou. Huo Qu Bing laughs that Li Guang has gotten lost in the past, but now it appears Gong Xun Aou has also gotten lost. I ask what to do, and he points to the distant Qi Lian Mountain "We're going there."

I immediately let out my pent up breath and stare at the Qi Lian Mountains. My emotions calmed down. He's not new to fighting alone. The first time he took eight hundred troops and sneaked into the Xiong Nu army base. Next he took ten thousand troops and with the speed of the wind destroyed five Xiong Nu tribes in six days. Even though the plan had changed, he can handle fighting alone.

Qi Lian Mountain is rich and fertile, the place where the Xiong Nu herd their livestock. It is also one of their pride and joys. This battle will not be easy, but if we win, Papa will surely be very happy. Papa....

He saw me staring at the mountains, apologizing "I thought this battle would be easier, who knew we'd be rushing yet again." I gather myself, not wanting him to worry, acting casual "I won't let you make us wolves seem useless.""

He smiled and nodded his head, then flew off towards the front of the army. The rising sun reflected off his back, with the armor giving off a thousand beams of light. It was like a flying sun, breathtaking to behold in its majesty.

Huo Qu Bing's forces were already the most fierce, but after he threw some fuel in the fire, they were even more revved up to go. Ten thousand fearless men marched behind him, traversing this great North Western territory.

After we traveled for awhile, I asked Chen An Kang why we appeared to be heading back. He looked around, unable to confirm because this Gobi Desert looks all the same to him. I tell him to go ask the General if he knows he's walking backwards. Otherwise he can laugh about General Gong Xun getting lost and then he ends up getting lost himself.

After a few moments Huo Qu Bing returns to my side and explains that the Xiong Nu have gotten word of where the army is expected to move, so he needs to change directions otherwise they will lay in wait for us. I look at the circling falcons above and remain silent. He continues "I've been around the desert many times with Uncle since I was a kid. I can walk around here without getting lost. And with you here, I can relax and let us wander aimlessly. If we get the Xiong Nu confused, then it will be better for the attack."

I turn and ask the person holding the cage to be careful and not let Xiao Tao and Xiao Qian out, but I can see they are frustrated with being cooped up.

From morning until evening we rushed around, and Huo Qu Bing's expression grew more and more concerned. After turning in the Gobi Desert a few times, the Xiong Nu ought not to be able to track us, yet they are still able to know where the army is. There is still a tracker following a distance behind the army.

During dinner, he doesn't eat and I ask what he is thinking about. "With our speed, and

this random moving around, the Xiong Nu shouldn't know our every move. This has never happened before. Usually we attack the Xiong Nu, but this time they are chasing us." He furrowed his brows and looked perplexed.

I point to the sky and he looks upward. In the sky are two tiny black specks. He startled and then asked "Are you saying those two furry beasts are the Xiong Nu's tracking agents?"

I laugh and nod "Those guys are the most annoying. In the past when we would capture a prey, they would circle overhead and try to steal our prey. Sometimes they would even fight with the wolves for it. Because they can fly, the wolves can't do much except chase them away. But they would fly away and then dive back down to fight. Since I've tangled with these guys in the past, I can tell that those two above are behaving unusually. Instead of looking for prey, they continue to follow us and stay above our heads."

Huo Qu Bing smiled bitterly "I had heard the rumor that pigeons can pass word for their owners, but now this other legend has come true. Just my luck to run into it. I wonder how many the Xiong Nu have trained?"

I respond "Their nests are always in hard to reach places so it's hard to capture a young one. They are arrogant and love freedom, so unless they were raised from infancy, they won't listen to human commands. For the Xiong Nu to have two is rare enough, otherwise this wouldn't just be a legend. Also, you wouldn't have been able to sneak into the Xiong Nu base with your eight hundred men."

He laughed and slapped his legs "Just two? That's easy! Tomorrow I'll serve it each an arrow and we'll dine on roasted bird tomorrow night."

Shooting down birds is not a hard task, but those two have been well trained, so all morning they circled just above the reach of any flying arrow. There remains no opportunity to shoot them down, and I'm beginning to get impatient and go check on them. Huo Qu Bing doesn't have his usual impetuousness, and instead looks calm and determined. Right now he's like an experienced wolf, laying in wait for his prey. No matter how many days, no rush and no worries, just scouting the prey and waiting for the right moment to give it a deadly blow.

Suddenly there was a roar and I looked up to see a black spot hurtling towards the ground. At that time, there was a cry and the other falcon follows it down. But an arrow just barely misses it, and it immediately pulls back up and circles once again outside the reach of the arrows. The other archer kneels and begs forgiveness for his failure, while Huo Qu Bing just looks solemnly at the remaining falcon in the sky. I worriedly look towards Huo Qu Bing, knowing this is not good.

These two falcons have been trained and have better instincts than wild ones. With this fright, it will not give us another chance to shoot at it. The Xiong Nu will clearly be enraged by the death of their valuable agents, meaning we might soon be engaged in a battle, one in which the enemy knows us but we do not know the enemy.

Huo Qu Bing suddenly looked at me and his face broke into a wide smile, full of confidence. He was just like the noon sun over the Gobi Desert, shining his light over everything and leaving no shadow. I'm affected by his attitude and I can't help but smile a

little. Even I'm influenced by his confidence, much less his troops who trained under him and fought with him. In two battles, he has had an overwhelming victory, so his Yu Lin Army brothers trust him implicitly. It's like as long as they are following Huo Qu Bing, no matter the enemy ahead, they will prevail. That is the confidence he instills in every soldier.

Because the army needs a lot of water, Huo Qu Bing asks me where the nearest water source is. We decide to head to the Ju Yen Sea, the name comes from the Xiong Nu language to mean weak water in flowing sands. It is situated within Xiong Nu territory.

The lone falcon continues to follow us and Huo Qu Bing would occasionally look up at it, though he never looked concerned. As we neared the Ju Yen Sea, Chen An Kang and another young man named Zhao Puo Nu came over and gave me a strange look. Zhao Puo Nu spoke up "The Xiong Nu must know now that we are headed to the Ju Yen Sea, so this upcoming battle is unavoidable. But having the Xiong Nu aware of our moves puts us always at a disadvantage. Your servant I have an idea for killing that falcon."

I knew what he was getting at and huffed coldly before turning away. Huo Qu Bing told them to never mention this again. Zhao Puo Nu kneeled down "General, using the pigeons as bait, as long as we shoot the falcon first, the pigeons won't be harmed. And even if the pigeons are sacrificed, it is for the greater good of the army. When we return to Chang An I will personally buy the Brother here two pigeons."

I glared at Zhao Puo Nu and stalked away with the slash of my whip. I grabbed the pigeon cage and refused to let anyone handle it. Only next to me do I feel safe. Chen An Kang rode next to me for some time and asked me not to be mad anymore. The General didn't agree with their proposal, right? I kept staring ahead and he had no choice but to be quiet. I tell him to bring Li Cheng over here, I'm worried about him.

The lake is clear and surrounded by verdant greenery. The sky and the clouds reflect on the surface, and with a wind blowing through, small ripples sway and dance. Near the lake are some cranes dancing in the water and ducks taking flight. Li Cheng gaped at this beauty, that the Xiong Nu have such beautiful lands. I was about to explain how I played here as a kid, but I stopped talking.

When suddenly a thousand water fowls loudly cried out in fright and then took flight, Huo Qu Bing was the first to raise his bow and arrow. It's not like I haven't experienced a life and death struggle before, but being in the middle of a battle of tens of thousand is the first time I realized that what I experienced before was comparatively child's play.

The horses wail and the people roar. The swords slash in the air, the beauty of the lake marred with one cold slash after another. The red of the blood splatters everywhere, almost like a red flower blooming for just a moment before immediately wilting. I can't see what is happening, everywhere around me is just blood and fighting. Chen An Kang shook me "The first time on the battlefield I almost peed my pants, you're doing better than me, your face is just ghostly white." I know he's trying to distract me but I am speechless.

I suddenly look around for Li Cheng, and Chen An Kang thinks the kid probably ran to the front. I was so angry I wanted to slap myself. I jumped on a horse and want to take off but Chen An Kang refuses to let go "You cannot go to the front line, these are the

General's orders. And even if you go now you can't do anything, you won't be able to find Li Cheng. You haven't practiced with the army before so you don't know how to fight in tandem, so you'll just distract the soldiers. You need to wait here until the fighting is done."

I tightly grasp the horse reins and stare straight ahead at the violent battle. Chen An Kang softly said "Once on the battlefield, life and death is but a moment's difference. What was yesterday's drinking buddy might be fallen before you tomorrow."

My heart suddenly wrenched into a tight knot, my body still as can be. I calmly asked "Then....the General....he will be fine?"

Chen An Kang was silent for a moment "There are no guarantees on the battlefield. But the General has been training with the Yu Lin Army since he was a child. He also learned directly from the Great General Weil. With his experience, he will be fine."

The blood of the Xiong Nu, the blood of the Han, I cannot tell why my heart is shaking. I look skyward, making certain that the blue sky and the white clouds still remain unchanged.

The Xiong Nu army is defeated and retreats, leaving the Ju Yen Sea returned to it's normal tranquility. Except for the smell of blood and a sea of dead bodies littering the area. I see eagles circling overhead, waiting to feast. I looked around and Huo Qu Bing rode up to me "Are you alright?" I force a smile and nod, but my eyes are still searching through the crowd. Chen An Kang pointed "Isn't that Li Cheng?" and there Li Cheng stood holding a sword and waving to me. I finally relaxed and waved back. He was so excited, yelling "I finally avenged my family, I helped defeat the Xiong Nu....."

Suddenly an injured Xiong Nu soldier heaved himself up and threw a dagger at Li Cheng. "Watch out!" I cried as I rushed towards him, but I was too far away and couldn't use my gold bells to deflect the dagger. I could only watch it embed itself in Li Cheng's chest. An arrow flew past me and pinned the injured Xiong Nu soldier dead to the ground.

Li Cheng stared at the dagger in his chest and then looked at me, confused as to what was happening. I held him in my arms and tried to stop the bleeding as Chen An Kang called for a medic. Huo Qu Bing walked over and took a look, indicating to me that it was a clean stab right into the heart.

Li Cheng asked if he was about to die, and then told me not to be sad. He had killed Xiong Nu and was now going to see his parents and his sister. He missed them so much.... His hands grew cold and I watched as the blood drained out of him. My heart felt cold, knowing this was all my fault, my fault.....

Huo Qu Bing quietly stood next to me and looked out over the Sea. I gently laid Li Cheng down and walked over to the edge of the water to wash the blood of my hands. Huo Qu Bing looked at me, and then ordered Li Cheng's body to be cremated. He walked over to me and bent down to wash his hands "After the war is over, I'll have his ashes sent back to be cremated with his family, so he's not lonely."

I raised my head to look at the circling eagles, and I can't differentiate the tracking falcon anymore.

The horses are thundering forward and I remain silent. Huo Qu Bing continues to silently ride beside me. I occasionally raise my head to look at the falcon and then resume riding. As I looked towards the sky once again, Huo Qu Bing spoke up “It’s not your fault, so stop blaming yourself. There will be deaths in battle, and this is something Li Cheng knew when he joined the army.” I stare at the sky “If I didn’t promise he could go to battle, he might still be alive.”

Huo Qu Bing was exasperated “You’re so obstinate. Without you Li Cheng would find a way onto the battlefield. As a man he needs to stand up for what he believes in. Between revenge and going on with his life, if you let Li Cheng choose again, he would still choose to go to battle.”

I looked at Huo Qu Bing “If we don’t shoot down that damn bird, we won’t be able to arrive safely at Qi Lian Mountain.” He tells me to be patient, that falcon can’t be alert all the time.

I look at Xiao Tao and Xiao Qian “The armies have been split into three routes, but now General Li Guang and General Gong Xun Aou are nowhere to be found. We are in the middle of Xiong Nu territory, and our advantage is a sneak attack. If we keep waiting, we might all end up dead at the base of the Qi Lian Mountains.

I touched the cage and slowly opened the door. Xiao Tao and Xiao Qian, having been cooped up for so long, happily jump on my arm. I tell Huo Qu Bing “Prepare your bow and arrow.” I lightly stroked their head and whispered “I’m sorry, sending you to do such a dangerous mission. Don’t get close to the falcon, just lure it lower. You have to do your best to fly as fast as you can.”

Huo Qu Bing called “Yu Er!” indicating that he was ready. I waved my arm, sending Xiao Qian and Xiao Tao into the air. I pick up the whistle around my neck and begin to blow into it, ordering Xiao Qian and Xiao Tao to lure the falcon lower. Xiao Qian circles overhead, still uncertain, but Xiao Tao has already dived straight for the falcon. Xiao Qian has no choice but to quickly fly behind Xiao Tao.

That falcon is well trained, because with food so near it remains uninterested and continues to circle high overhead. Xiao Qian and Xiao Tao try to lure it from a distance for quite some time but cannot tempt it. Xiao Tao suddenly rushes the falcon, ignoring my shock and attempts to summon her back, flapping her wings right in front of it a few times before flying away.

Falcons are one of the most vicious predators in the animal kingdom, and this one has likely never seen a bird so disrespect it. It becomes enraged and lets out a piercing cry and swoops with its sharp claws straight for Xiao Tao. I desperately blow my whistle to summon them back. Xiao Tao tries to descend but a pigeon is no match for a falcon’s speed and soon she is right under the grasp of the falcon’s claws.

To save Xiao Tao, Xiao Qian ignores my whistles to descend and instead swoops in to peck at the falcon’s eyes. The falcon spreads its wings and Xiao Qian is swept aside. Xiao Qian’s body falls from the sky and the falcon zooms down to grab him when suddenly an arrow pierces its chest and it falls straight to the ground.

Xiao Qian descends in a shaky fashion and I rush over to catch him. Before he lands on

my hands a few drops of blood hit me first. When Xiao Qian lands on my arm, he cannot even stand. His head lolls to one side and he falls on the ground. I catch him before he hits the ground, but his eyes are closed. One wing and an entire side of his chest is covered in blood. My hands shake uncontrollably. Xiao Tao cries out and uses her head to butt Xiao Qian's head. Xiao Qian opens his eyes to look at Xiao Tao, and with one final shudder his eyes shut for good.

The medic touches Xiao Qian and then turns to shake his head at Huo Qu Bing. I'm cradling Xiao Qian in my hands, like knives slicing into my heart. Xiao Tao uses her beak to fix Xiao Qian's feathers and coo'd pitifully a few times. I have never seen Xiao Tao so patient or gentle before. I can't control my tears anymore and drops start to fall on Xiao Qian. I keep saying over and over "I'm....sorry.....I'm.....sorry...."

Xiao Tao turned to look at me and rubbed her head on my hand, comforting me. She used her beak to fix Xiao Qian's feathers one more time and then suddenly took flight. I look up at Xiao Tao as she flies higher and higher. I suddenly react and start blowing my whistle. Come back. Come back now.

Xiao Tao continues to fly higher and higher. I start screaming "Xiao Tao, come back! Come back! You're not allowed to leave me all alone! You're not allowed to leave me!" Before I finish speaking, a black dot comes hurtling from the sky and Xiao Tao slams into the ground. The army has been watching in silent shock at the pigeon and falcon battle, and now with Xiao Tao's passionate act, everyone gasps. My voice is stuck inside my throat and I can't make any sound. My eyes are wide open and can only stare at Xiao Tao's body laying far away. I slowly sink to the ground.

Huo Qu Bing covered my eyes "Don't look anymore."

I violently jerked his hand off but he grabbed my arm. I started to hit him "This is all your fault, all your fault! Why did you make me follow you....."

"It's all my fault, it's all my fault. I will make sure the Xiong Nu pays for this." Huo Qu Bing gently said to me as he took a wet cloth from the army medic and placed it over my nose. I smelled a fragrant scent of flowers and my strength in hitting him decreases. My mind clouds and I lay on his shoulder, passing out.

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 2 - Chapter

4

Chapter 20: Deflowered

When I open my eyes again, I find myself in Huo Qu Bing's embrace. In the dark night, with the vast desert, the only sounds are the horse hooves. I look at the two or three faint stars in the sky, my heart completely empty. Mischievous Xiao Tao, constantly destroying things Xiao Tao, loves to annoy me Xiao Tao. Gentle Xiao Qian, always taking care of Xiao Tao's Xiao Qian.....

"Awake?" Huo Qu Bing lowered his head and looked at me. I was silent for some time before answering "Where are we? Xiao Yue Shi?"

He raised his head and looked towards the distance "You've slept for a day and a night now. We've passed Xiao Yue Shi, and are almost at the Qi Lian Mountains. You're familiar with the Qi Lian Mountains, right?" I softly answered yes. My body feels weak but I straighten myself "I want to ride by myself." He gently said "You were so distraught back there so the doctor upped the dosage to knock you out. Even though you are awake now, you likely can't exert any strength. I'll take you the rest of the way." I was silent and then nodded my head.

In the darkness the shape of the mountains grows closer. In the distance comes the sound of wolf howls. My heart lurched and I tightly gripped Huo Qu Bing's arm "Can you hurry? I hear....." I bit my lip and swallow the rest of what I wanted to say, only turning my head towards the Qi Lian Mountains.

Huo Qu Bing urged his horse faster and quickly bypassed everyone, rushing straight ahead. Gradually we've left everyone behind. I turn to give him a startled glance and he just smiles "I hope it's that wolf of yours."

A few wolves are lurking in the base of the mountains eyeing us. My heart leapt and I howled towards the Qi Lian Mountains. Huo Qu Bing's horse almost stumbled and wanted to throw me off. From the mountains came a distant howling, joining my howl and reverberating through the hillside. The horse continued to go wild so Huo Qu Bing had no choice but to get off the horse, holding me and leaping to the ground.

I immediately tear myself from his embrace and he doesn't stop me. He lets me howl and run towards the wolves at the base of the mountain. I can't believe that when they saw me, they gave a few low howls and then ran away with their tails twitching. All my emotions hit a roadblock and I angrily yelled "Wolf 89, why are you hiding from me? You don't recognize me?" A few small wolves came out and looked at me, and I tried to gesture for them to come over. They were getting close when their mother howled and they hid again.

I stomped my foot “I won’t force you to go warm yourself next to a fire.”

Huo Qu Bing stood to the side and laughed, shaking his head “Yu Er, I thought you were the princess of the wolves, and the wolves would come welcome you back. But it appears no one wants to see you right now.”

I glared at him and I hear a wolf howl getting closer and closer, with a final resounding howl that shook the trees. A silver wolf bounded out from the forest directly for me. I leaped forward to embrace him, grabbing his neck and the two of us rolling on the grass. Brother Wolf sniffed my face and neck while I hugged his neck, my nose all wet and my eyes all teary.

I fussed with Brother Wolf for some time before we calmed down. Brother Wolf howled towards the forest and a snow white female wolf and a silver and white baby wolf slowly walked out to greet me. I laughed and went to embrace the baby wolf, turning happily to Huo Qu Bing “I have a little niece. She’s the real princess of the wolves. Isn’t she beautiful?”

Huo Qu Bing smiled and walked forward, but Snow Lady warily eyed him and gave a warning howl. I shot Huo Qu Bing a pleased expression “She doesn’t like you, they don’t think you’re a nice person!” Huo Qu Bing had no choice but to halt.

Little Princess has a small face and spiky hair, like a snowball she rolls all over me. Brother Wolf used his tail to play with her and Little Princess was non stop leaping and jumping, occasionally returning to my embrace. She would bare her teeth and stick her tongue out at her father. I can’t control my laughter, and the sound of human laughter and wolf happiness sounds through the hillside. Huo Qu Bing stands off to the side and watches us, with an expression of worry mixed with self-blame.

The sound of horses at the base of the mountain indicates that the troops have arrived. Huo Qu Bing looked towards the foot of the mountain and the looked at me “Yu Er.” I looked at him and he stared directly into my eyes for some time “I have to head back. You.....you guys have reunited after much time apart, so you should just stay with them for the time being!” I looked at him disbelievingly but he smiled warmly “Just don’t leave Qi Lian Mountain anytime soon, okay?” All the longing in his eyes almost obscured his smile that was wishing for me to be happy.

I solemnly nodded my head and he looked towards Brother Wolf “I’ll leave Yu Er in your hands for now” and then not even waiting to see whether Brother Wolf understood what he said, it was like he was treating Brother Wolf as an elder brother and he gave Brother Wolf a respectful bow before turning and quickly running down the mountain.

.....

Little Princess follows behind me and Brother Wolf and awkwardly tries to play in the water. Our queen Snow Lady rests on a big rock and gazes gently down at us. I kick Brother Wolf, wondering how he managed to hoodwink such a beautiful wolf to be his bride. Brother Wolf howled and then his claws came towards my face, and I immediately chopped him on the neck. Snow Lady stood up in shock, but after watching us fighting as usual, finally quietly sat back down.

Poor Little Princess was sprayed by the water we splashed, causing her to choke and start

sinking in the water. I stopped fooling around with Brother Wolf and pulled her up, and Brother Wolf halted his claw which was about to strike me. Little Princess, with her round baby eyes, was giving me the most pitiful look, with her four paws helplessly swatting the air. She gave a pitiful whimper, causing me to laugh and kiss her nose before dragging her back to shore.

Snow Lady immediately came to lick the water drops off Little Princess, who nestled next to her mother with her stomach in the air. She used her paws to swat her mother's face and made happy noises, which made me happy to watch.

Brother Wolf came on shore and was ready to shake his fur. I gave him a warning glare, but he insisted on following me to shake. The water sprayed outward and landed on me, and I kicked him again. I start a fire to dry my clothes, but Brother Wolf doesn't rest next to me like usual. Because Snow Lady is not used to the fire, he keeps her company a distance away. They occasionally give each other head rubs or lick each other's fur.

Watching them, I know that Brother Wolf will never accompany me the same way again. He will be Snow Lady's partner from now on, and I am all alone to sit by the fire.

As my thoughts swirled around, somehow two days have passed. How are Huo Qu Bing and those folks? Suddenly there came the sound of a howl from the forest and I howled back. A lot of people are fighting? I sat there in silence for some time. There are no absolute victories on the battlefield, not even Huo Qu Bing. I suddenly get up and dress myself. Brother Wolf gave me a quizzical look. I take the roasted meat off the spit and hand it to him. It's still rare but he shouldn't mind.

"I have to leave for a bit" and I stroked his head. He howled in protest but I could only apologetically slap him on the back before turning to leave. He got up to accompany me but I stopped him. I didn't want him involved in our human battles.

Brother Wolf howled in frustration. Snow Lady gave a few low growls and Brother Wolf immediately calmed down. A well-forged steel nevertheless can't withstand a gentle force. I laugh at Brother Wolf and then quickly leave before he gets mad. Looking back I see three wolves in the moonlight, their shadows intertwining. I smile but my heart hurts. Brother Wolf has his own family now, and all I have are a heart full of memories I don't want to remember.

I traveled all night and it was almost dawn by the time I reached the battlefield. I hid on a tree and looked into the distance. After battling for a day and a night, the battle is nearing the end. The ground is littered with corpses and the trees and grass have all been stained red. The sound of steel striking steel reverberates in the air, giving what was a warm sunny morning a chilly aura.

I jump off the tree and traverse through the corpses. How many of these dead are Li Chengs of the Han dynasty, and how many are Li Chengs of the Xiong Nu. And all these dead bodies, how many more Li Chengs will be created because of this. Will more people put on armor to avenge the death of their fathers and brothers? How many dead bodies are there? Are there forty to fifty thousand people laying silently here? I ought to have been prepared to walk into this living hell, but my heart still shuddered. I walked for a long time but there was only an unending sea of dead bodies. The bottom of my robe was long soaked through the blood. Everywhere I look there remains just dead bodies and blood.

From the clothing, it looks like the Xiong Nu have suffered a great defeat, with the Xiong Nu dead greatly outnumbering the Han dead. A few lingering Xiong Nu soldiers see me and quickly grab their weapons. I send my gold ball flying and knock away their weapons. I walk right past them and a young man grabs his dagger and rushes me. I give him a cold look and speak in Xiong Nu “Hurry up and leave. Run as fast as you can. Your mother is at home waiting for you.” They halted and looked wary, but ultimately decided to leave.

The Summer sun was shining on the Qi Lian Mountains, turning the trees extra green. In the verdant mountain greenery, Huo Qu Bing, wearing a black robe with a silver armor, holding a broad sword in his hand, standing straight and tall, was surveying the battlefield from a high vantage point.

The silver armor and the reflection from his broad sword is so glittering that one can't look directly at him. Mixed with the blood scented breeze, his robe and his hair, which is free of his circlet, billows in the wind. On the ground is the ugly truth of blood stained dead bodies, but up high there are green trees and red flowers under the warm sun. The contrast is vivid, especially because he is standing there. These two seemingly contrasting images somehow meld together because of him, giving off a heart shaking type of astonishing visual clarity. The warrior gods of the legend could not possibly be more breathtaking than he is.

He's fine, so I let out a pent up breath. I turn to leave “Yu.....Er.....” a loud and joyful cry reverberates in the mountains, shattering the chilly aura in the air. I turn around and he is quickly traversing the trees and the flowers, his hair flying in the wind “You came here to look for me? You were worried about me?” I checked him out “What happened to your hair?”

He laughed “The circlet accidentally got shot off by an arrow.” I point to the battlefield “Did the Xiong Nu suffer a defeat?”

He smiled and nodded his head “Not just a defeat, a complete and utter defeat. I captured one tribal leader and five small tribal heads. We had less men but they lost almost all their soldiers and we only lost a third of ours.”

Zhao Puo Nu came up and bowed “General, sir! We have counted the Xiong Nu dead, a total of thirty thousand two hundred men.” Huo Qu Bing nodded and Zhao Puo Nu continued “The Xiong Nu will have no ability to amass more forces here at the Qi Lian Mountains, so tonight we can rest. The General can admire the beauty of this mountain vista so prized by the Xiong Nu.” Huo Qu Bing looked at me and then waved Zhao Puo Nu off.

“How come you don't look the least bit happy?” Huo Qu Bing asked me. “This battle is for the Emperor to win more territory and expand his empire and open more roads to Xi Yu. What does it have to do with me? Perhaps this battle avenged Li Cheng's death, but then this type of vengeance will never end.” He raised his eyebrow “It's rare to meet a Han person who doesn't hate the Xiong Nu.” I change the subject and point to his head “Go bathe and change! I also need to change.”

He smiled and tried to grab my hand but I brushed him away “Right now you might not be able to beat me in a fight, so just behave yourself.” He kept smiling behind me “We've been more intimate than holding hands, so what's the reticence with hand holding all of a

sudden?"

I glared at him and he quickly retracted his hand with a smile "Fine, but at least you're more spirited now than a minute ago." I startle for a moment before realizing I fell into his trap again. I shake my head and silently walk away, and he also quietly walks beside me. We gradually leave the battlefield behind and the smell of flowers permeates the air. My emotions have calmed down considerably.

As we walk through the wooded forest, our shadows are overlapping. I suddenly remember how the shadows of Brother Wolf's family overlapped under the moonlight.

A fire is blazing in the mountain side, everyone is happy and celebrating, the wine is flowing. Only Huo Qu Bing and I sit around our fire, but soldiers would come toast him before swiftly departing. Huo Qu Bing handed me a flask of wine. I'm about to decline when I smell it and immediately ask "Is this horse wine?" He nods "The spoils of today's battle. Our wine can't even compare with this taste." I take it and gingerly take a sip, the taste bringing back memories.

Huo Qu Bing takes a few sips and then hands it back to me, but I shake my head. He smiles, which is when Zhao Puo Nu arrives with two bowls to toast us. Huo Qu Bing laughingly yelled at him "Are you trying to get me drunk? You toasted already so why are you back?"

Zhao Puo Nu handed a bowl to me "This wine is not for the General, it's for Brother Jin. I want to apologize for earlier. I have never seen pigeons who dare to battle a falcon, and I never knew your pigeons would be so brave. I could never replace those pigeons of yours, and I ask you to please forgive my ignorance and insensitivity earlier." I can see the regret in his eyes. I didn't say anything or accept the wine, so his smile freezes "If you do not accept my apology, I understand." and he downs his bowl of wine and bows to me before turning to leave. I grab the remaining bowl from his hand and down it in one gulp with my eyes closed, causing me to choke a little.

Huo Qu Bing smiled at Zhao Puo Nu "That was quite a response, with such bad alcohol tolerance and gulping that bowl down. Normally this one doesn't drink much." Zhao Puo Nu smiled and bowed to us before leaving.

I sat for awhile and then my head started to spin. I stand up "I should go back before the alcohol hits my head." He also stood up and grabbed the flask "Let's go together."

Huo Qu Bing's tent is set up at the back of the mountains. Because of consideration for me, he ordered other tents to be set up some distance away. Before I arrive at the tent my body is already starting to grow weak. Huo Qu Bing assisted me but I shook off his hand. But I was barely standing so he ignored my struggling and picked me up and brought me inside the tent.

In the darkness, my mind suddenly feels especially clear. The past comes flooding back in moments of clarity and then confusion. I can't control what I'm thinking, and the things I rather not think about keep coming back the clearest, causing my heart to hurt.

Huo Qu Bing lit the lamp and then sat down next to me, giving me a look. He sighed and took out a handkerchief to wipe my tears "Are you still sad because of Xiao Tao, Xiao Qian, and Li Cheng?" I grab his sleeve and keep sobbing "My Papa is gone, Jiu Ye doesn't

want me, Xiao Qian and Xiao Tao are gone, and even Brother Wolf has his own wife and daughter. I'm all alone now."

Huo Qu Bing's hand froze and he took a drink from the flask before continuing to wipe my tears "Nonsense! What do you mean you're all alone? I'll be by your side."

My nose was running and I grabbed his sleeve to blow my nose "Why are you so good to me and spend all this effort on me?"

He stared at his own sleeve and shook his head with resignation. He jerked my hand away and shoved the handkerchief in my hand before taking off his outer robe. "Are you really that stupid or just pretending to be stupid? I may have never explicitly said it, but can't you see that I want to marry you?"

I grab for the flask but he keeps it out of my reach "You're not drinking anymore" and then he took another swig.

I reach for it again and he grabbed my hand "Answer me this, and I'll let you drink. Do you like me even a little bit?" His piercing eyes stared at me, and I cocked my head to one side, thinking before answering "I don't know."

Huo Qu Bing let out a long sigh "Then in the past, did you ever feel sad when you saw me hurting? Did you worry about me today?"

I nodded my head vigorously "Even today I refuse to look at an acacia flower. The moment I see it my heart hurts. I was so afraid you would be injured by the Xiong Nu that I rushed all night to get to you."

He gave a sad smile "Then I am in your heart" and he continued to drink "That day at the Yue Ya Spring, you had walked away, but why did you turn back? When you turned back to look at me, did you know your face was all red? Why was your face red? If your heart didn't want to see me, why did you save a viewing room at the Luo Yu House for me? When you're not happy, I will always try to make you laugh. But when I'm unhappy, you always try to change the subject. When I was stewing over the criticism of those scholars like Xi Ma Qian that day, normally you don't like to tussle with me, but that day you grabbed my sleeve and kept chattering. I knew you were trying to make me laugh. Awhile ago, you were cooking up ideas because I had kept you here, but the moment I mentioned my father, you immediately changed the subject and kept nattering about random topics. Yu Er, I was only wrong once, late once. If in Chang An....."

I laughed and pointed at his face "You're getting drunk. You're face is so red, like a monkey's bottom." He smiled and shook his head "You're the one who is drunk. Otherwise how can you cry one moment and then laugh another moment."

I shook my head and then splayed open my hands "I'm not drunk, I'm completely lucid."

I stared at the flask in his hand "I want to drink, I haven't drank horse wine in a long time. I snuck some as a kid and it tasted terrible." He took another drink "Now you don't think it tastes terrible anymore?" I make a weepy face "It still tastes terrible, but the taste reminds me of Papa."

He handed me the flask and I took a big drink. He finished up the rest and then tossed the flask aside. "Yu Er, don't return to the wolf pack. Marry me!" Huo Qu Bing laid down on

the carpet and gave me a drunken twinkling smile. I giggle back at him but don't answer. He continued "Meng Jiu is indeed not bad. Like a willow tree, with a calm smile like the moonlight. He is indeed one of those rare young men in this world. But I'm not bad either. And I will always be good to you. So just forget him!"

Before I can answer, he started laughing "I am drunk. If I wasn't drunk, I couldn't possibly have spoken aloud what I just said, even if that is what I believe in my heart."

I furrowed my brows. The warm shadow under the lamplight, that gentle calm shadow, the kind and caring shadow..... Huo Qu Bing's face was suddenly in front of my eyes "Right now I'm the person in front of you, don't think about someone else."

I stare at him and start to cry. Huo Qu Bing wipes my tears away and his hand caresses my face. He hesitated when he touched my lips, his hand turning burning. He stiffened and I just stared at him. He suddenly took a deep breath and kissed me. My heart both knew what was happening and didn't know what was happening. My body became light and soft, like I was about to float away, or suddenly fall to earth. Only his lips, his hand, his body, it was like a burning flame. My heart was so cold, and I wanted this heat.....

.....

I vaguely heard the sound of wolf howling and it woke me up. My head hurts and my body feels weak. I struggle to open my eyes, but when I see that I am entwined intimately with Huo Qu Bing, I immediately shut my eyes. In shock, what happened yesterday night came flooding back. I'm too afraid to move and my mind is muddy. Another wolf howl sounded, so I closed my eyes and softly slid out of Huo Qu Bing's embrace. I turn my back to him and hurry up and get dressed.

There is a flickering candle but I can't face such a bright room so I blow it out. I stand in the darkness, while behind me Huo Qu Bing turns over. I startled and then quickly run out of the tent. I can see the soldiers doing their rounds so I dart into the forest and run towards the direction of the howling.

A crescent moon hangs in the sky, shining down on a small lake in the forest. Brother Wolf is resting on a big rock next to the lake, howling into the sky. Snow Lady howls with him. Little Princess sees me and immediately jumps forward, but she stops herself when she reaches me. She makes whimpering sounds and hesitates. I bit my lip before picking her up "My smell changed?" I walked over to Brother Wolf and he suspiciously sniffed me and howled a few times. I ignored him so he just flopped back down.

My smell changed? Because I'm no longer a girl anymore, I'm a woman now. I splash my face with the cold water, wanting it to wake myself up. But what can I do after I am awake? I stare at the lake surface, with a thousand thoughts I can't make sense of.

Little Princess started squirming in my arms but I don't play with her like usual. She gets impatient and then jumps out of my arms to go bite her dad's tail. Snow Lady suddenly jerks in the direction of the forest and gives a warning growl. I turn to look towards that direction but don't see anything. I knew there was something in the distance that alarmed Snow Lady, yet Brother Wolf remained nonchalantly playing with Little Princess. He gave a low growl to Snow Lady, causing my body to freeze. Once Snow Lady heard Brother Wolf's growl, she relaxed her attack stance, but remained cautiously protecting Little

Princess.

A short while later, I heard someone softly walk up behind me. With worry and hesitation “Yu....Yu Er, I.....I.....” his voice trailed off. The surroundings turned silent again. One forward, one back, neither of us moving. Little Princess stopping goofing around and turned to give us a quizzical look. Brother Wolf got impatient and let out a long howl. He swatted me with his paw and then yelped at Huo Qu Bing before taking Snow Lady and Little Princess away with him.

Huo Qu Bing walked closer behind me “I’m.....I’m sorry. I....I.....”

A man like him actually has a moment when he is so nervous he can’t get a full sentence out. I hug my knees and look out over the lake “There is nothing to be sorry for. If we did something wrong, we are both equally to blame. It’s not like you forced me.” My voice was calm but my heart was churning.

Huo Qu Bing walked a few steps away and then sat down on another rock. He stared out on the lake and we sat there in silence for some time. He picked up a rock next to his foot and tossed it into the lake, happening to hit the reflection of the moon on the lake. The moon shatters. He suddenly stood up and walked back to me. He grabbed my shoulders and made me look at him. With an unwavering look “Yu Er, marry me.”

My heart was a mess and I don’t dare look at him, so I avert my eyes and look at the opposite side of the lake. I discovered Brother Wolf and Snow Lady were sitting side by side intently looking at us. Little Princess mimicked her parents and was sitting on the ground with her head cocked, staring at me with her bright eyes. In all my confusion I started to laugh. I picked up a rock and threw it towards Brother Wolf “See something interesting?”

Brother Wolf didn’t move or blink as the rock landed right next to him, but it frightened Little Princess who yelped and climbed on her father’s back. Even though Brother Wolf couldn’t talk, I can see the worry in his eyes, and his hope and encouragement. It was a look that revealed how much he wanted me to find happiness. It was the same look Papa gave me when we parted that final time.

I looked into Brother Wolf’s eyes and smiled “Yes.”

Huo Qu Bing grabbed my arms “You said yes? Was that yes directed at me?” I looked around and laughed “Is there anyone else here? If so then I might need to reconsider?” Huo Qu Bing stared at me, and then he let out a joyful holler before picking me up from the rock. He was hugging me and Brother Wolf let out a long howl towards the sky. Little Princess mimicked her father and let out a teeny baby howl towards the sky.

In that moment, the sound of happiness sounded through the forest. I looked at the slowly disappearing moon. Right now, is that same moon shining on that person still in Chang An? I looked at Huo Qu Bing and I could see the unfettered joy in his eyes. I stared at him and my heart started to twinge. I smiled and reached out to hug him, resting my head on his shoulder. Huo Qu Bing quietly embraced me, and then he shook me slightly “Can you say it again? Did you really agree?”

My heart was filled with both happiness and a touch of aching for him “Jin Yu is willing to marry Huo Qu Bing.” He loudly laughed “This is the best thing I have ever heard in my

entire life. Can you say it again?" I punched his shoulder "Not saying it again."

He lowered his forehead and rested it against mine, his mouth still smiling broadly, looking at me with eyes that shine brighter than the stars. He softly pleaded "Say it one more time. Just one more time."

I stared at him even as my lips consented to his request "I am willing to marry you." Huo Qu Bing kissed me on the cheek "My wonderful wifey."

I stood there stunned, so immediately his smile froze and he looked at me with hesitation. "My wonderful wifey", those three words tumbled through my mind. Only now do I really understand that my role in life is about to change. My face started burning up and I couldn't help myself but smile. Huo Qu Bing understood what I was thinking and his worry went away. He stared at me with the most tender of expressions, without saying a word, continuing to embrace me tightly.

The Eastern sky is starting to turn bright, and in the forest all the birds are beginning to sing. The darkness is ending, and a new day is beginning, just like my life.

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 2 - Chapter 5

Chapter 21: First Kiss

Huo Qu Bing and I walked ahead, while Brother Wolf and Snow Lady followed behind me. Little Princess would sometimes run ahead to chase a butterfly, run next to me to make me carry her, or mimic her parents and walk leisurely besides us.

After spending more than two days together, Snow Lady has lowered her caution towards Huo Qu Bing and doesn't stop him from getting close to Little Princess as long as I'm around. "If we continue down this road, we will be headed towards the chief Xiong Nu tribe's territory. Even though they have lost many battles, but there are likely troops nearby and it might be hard to avoid running into them." Huo Qu Bing smiled and reminded me.

I replied "I know. The Xiong Nu live along the water ways, and the Qi Lian Mountains are the Xiong Nu's most beautiful and fertile lands. The Xiong Nu army might have been defeated, but the nomadic Xiong Nu herders who live here are likely loathe to depart. Even if we don't run into the army, we'll likely run into some herders." He asked quizzically "You said we were going to see someone. Is it a Xiong Nu person?"

I glanced at him "What if it is a Xiong Nu person?" He confidently laughed "Yu Er, smile. This whole way your expression has gotten more and more somber. Who cares if it is a Xiong Nu person. Even if it is the Shan Yu of the Xiong Nu, I will gladly go with you to meet him."

He looked at my outfit "But I don't think it is a Xiong Nu person. Of the outfits I got you, there was a Han outfit, and various Xi Yu outfits, and even a Xiong Nu outfit. You chose a Gui Su outfit, and the Xiong Nu outfit was the first outfit you tossed aside, with a look of disgust."

I lightly sighed "I ought to be wearing a Han outfit, but the Gui Su outfit comes with a face veil." I checked him out "But it's enough that you're wearing it."

Over one mountain and another, we traverse the dense woods. Brother Wolf has already realized where I am headed and he impatiently followed behind me and then rushed forward. He came back after some time and lowly growled to me. I immediately stop walking. Huo Qu Bing asked "What? Someone is ahead?" I nodded, hesitating for a moment before walking forward. Both the humans and the wolves silenced our footsteps.

Huo Qu Bing and I crouched down and moved behind the heavy brush. When I saw a figure in front of the gravestone, I immediately froze. Huo Qu Bing also stopped and

peered out between the brush. There was one large gravestone and one small gravestone. A man was quietly sitting in front of the gravestone drinking alone. Behind him stood two guards a respectful distance away. Huo Qu Bing recognized the person sitting in front of the grave and turned to give me a questioning look. I only silently stared at Yi Zhi Xie sitting in front of the grave.

In the growth of the mountain side came the sound of insects buzzing. Bits of sunlight shone down on the grave through the tree tops and on Yi Zhi Xie, giving off a sense of isolation. He faced the grave and was quietly drinking. His shadow reflected his melancholy, with every raised cup he seemed to be drinking in his sorrow.

Yi Zhi Xie used his hands to fix the weeds around the grave. His two guards immediately stepped forward to do it but he silently waved them away. The two looked at each other and then retreated. My hand was unconsciously gripping the branch next to me, tighter and tighter. By the time Huo Qu Bing realized it and removed my hand from the branch, it was already covered in blood. Yi Zhi Xie cleaned both graves and then he poured a glass for the large grave and toasted it.

“Brother Xu, you ought to be happy today. Half of Qi Lian Mountains has already been stolen by the Han dynasty. Perhaps soon you will be resting here under Han owned earth. I hope you don’t mind drinking with me. You told me before that the nomadic tribes, compared to the agricultural communities, will always be at a disadvantage. In the short term, the nomadic tribes can use fast speed to conquer the agricultural cultures. But if the nomadic tribes don’t quickly adapt to an agricultural basis, the citizenry and the wealth will always not measure up. In the long run, it will lose to the agricultural communities. I asked you then, what if we adopted the agricultural way of life, and you said then we could potentially rule successfully. But then after a few generations, our nomadic culture and identity would disappear, and over time the nomadic descendants would become the minority and subject to discrimination. At that time I refused to accept this. Our Xiong Nu braves have lived like this for generations, and as long as we had warriors, we would never disappear that easily. But now I finally understand what you were trying to say. Things are happening now like you predicted. After a period of growth, the Han dynasty is rich and powerful. Compared to the Xiong Nu, we cannot match up in man power or wealth.”

Yi Zhi Xie poured another cup for Papa “In the past there was Wei Qing, and now there is a Huo Qu Bing. There isn’t a single commanding general in the Xiong Nu army. Our most revered riding forces were defeated by Huo Qu Bing. A General born in an agricultural community actually is a faster and more vicious than our soldiers who were born and bred on a horse. Because of him, the Han dynasty has changed from the defensive stance it kept during the General Wei Qing generation into one where they are on the offensive.”

He gulped his wine and sighed “These are just some worries, but what worries me the most is that all the armies are united under the Han Emperor, but all our armies are splintered into different tribes. On the surface all the leaders of the tribes bow to the Shan Yu, but they each have their own calculations. With one Huo Qu Bing, each tribal leader is afraid their troops will be sacrificed on the front line, hoping some other tribe will be deployed first. But all the waiting for others to fight their battles, we are just waiting for our own demise. On this alone we have already lost to the Han dynasty. But I will not give

up, and I cannot give up. If I could have been born ten years earlier, before Liu Che ascended the throne and fixed our internal political structure, then today..... But the Heavens appears to not want to give the Xiong Nu anymore time. The Heavens appear to favor the Han.....”

I shot Huo Qu Bing a look. So he has become the most deadly and fearful enemy in the eyes of the Xiong Nu. Huo Qu Bing looked at my demeanor and asked if I understood what he was saying. I nodded my head. Yi Zhi Xie’s hand brushed over the small grave and rested there. He appeared to be deep in thought. After a long time, his hand remained on the grave.

Looking at his expression, I felt a sense of confusion. He shouldn’t be the one who sent someone to kill me. He doesn’t appear to suspect that I’m not dead. But.....I stopped. None of this was important, and I don’t want to waste any time thinking about it. He sat for some more time before finally getting up wordlessly and leaving with his retainers. I crouched for awhile longer before walking out of the woods and kneeling before the grave. “Papa, I brought someone to meet you.”

I looked at Huo Qu Bing and he immediately kneeled and bowed his head to the ground “Sir, I am Huo Qu Bing, and I am going to marry your daughter.” I initially had tears in my eyes, but when I heard his words, I laughed through my tears “How can you be so impatient? What if my Papa doesn’t like you?”

He smiled and looked over the tombstone “Was your father a Xiong Nu?” I shook my head “A Han.” He looked at the smaller grave and asked “Your sibling?”

Even though Yi Zhi Xie cleaned Papa’s grave, I still took out a cloth and thoroughly wiped it. Huo Qu Bing took the cloth from my hands “Let me clean it! If your Papa saw the wounds on your hands, he’ll blame me. If he gets angry, he might not marry you to me. That would be terrible.”

Huo Qu Bing finished wiping the grave and was about to wipe down the small grave when I stopped him “That one doesn’t need to be cleaned.” He looked confused but didn’t ask further. I was quiet for a moment “That is my grave.”

Huo Qu Bing stopped for a moment and then he understood everything “No wonder you were so frightened to see him in Chang An. You don’t want him to know you’re alive.” I nodded.

Brother Wolf circled the grave a few times before getting bored and running into the forest with Snow Lady and Little Princess. I sit on the ground “You conquered this Qi Lian Mountains, letting Papa rest on Han soil. Papa will surely like you.” Huo Qu Bing was a bit taken aback but smiled and bow three more times to Papa “Thank you for the praise, father-in-law.”

I was embarrassed and frustrated “How can there be someone like you, changing references so quickly and calling him father-in-law? My Papa was a carefree man but he was a stickler for etiquette.” Huo Qu Bing raised his eyebrow “You’re not very much like your Papa.”

I laughed and nodded “Yes, Papa said I am a wild one. I can’t endure those stupid rules created by people. Even now, if Papa saw me I would look like a upstanding person, and I

can follow rules if I must, but really.....” Huo Qu Bing laughed and finished for me “You’re a wolf-hearted dog-livered person.”

I humped at him “Thank you for the compliment. When I was small I thought people should use wolf-hearted and dog-livered as a compliment. Wolves and dogs are very loyal animals, and quite smart. I don’t understand why the Han use this as an insult.” Huo Qu Bing raised his head and starting laughing, which made my heart ache a bit “Many years ago when I said the same thing to Papa, he also laughed heartily like that.”

The sun is setting and the waning light shines on Papa’s grave, giving it a warm red aura. Huo Qu Bing stays by my side this whole time. Whatever I’m willing to say, he listens. Whatever I’m not willing to say, he doesn’t ask. Whenever I feel sadness rising, with just a few teasing words from him getting me all angry and laughing, he brushes it all away. I squint and look at the setting sun and think “Papa, you can finally rest your heart. With this person beside me, I won’t even have time to cry.”

Thinking of Yi Zhi Xie’s lonely figure before the grave, and looking at Huo Qu Bing gazing at me with eyes full of affection and care, I feel so many emotions inside. As our eyes met, he suddenly snapped his fingers and said angrily “If you keep looking at me like that, I will.....” before I can avoid him he’s already kissed me on the cheek “.....take advantage of the moment.”

I angrily hit him and he laughs “Father-in-law, do you see how mean and bad-tempered Yu Er is?”

At that very moment, I finally let it all go. I let go of the past, let go of my hate towards Yi Zhi Xie. Papa, your daughter finally understands now what you have been teaching me. Only when you let it all go and walk forward can you find happiness.

.....

Even though the Xiong Nu suffered a great defeat, the ordinary people continue on with their lives. The cows and the sheep continue to roam under the blue skies, the market places are still buzzing with activity. The Han, the Xiong Nu, and the various Xi Yu people are all gathered together to do business. A blind Xiong Nu man sits in the corner and plays a horse lute, singing a mournful song. Some listening to it looks despondent, while others are smiling, and some just sigh and throw down a few coins before hurrying away.

Huo Qu Bing tossed a silver bullion which caused everyone to look at me. I quickly pulled him away and he asked me in a low voice “What was that man singing about?” I gave him a side long look “You.” He laughed “Me? Too bad I don’t understand Xiong Nu.”

I hum the tune and translate the lyrics “Loss of our Yen Zhi Mountains, causing our wives to lose all color; destroy our Qi Lian Mountains, causing our animals to have no shelter.” The song was simple but the words so true yet sad that even my singing is tinged with sadness. As we walked away, we see other people drinking and singing the blind man’s song. Huo Qu Bing glanced at the people singing “Now I know why you’re not happy even though we won the battle.”

I answered “I’ve never been interested in warfare nor would it make me happy. I’m not a pacifist, and when a battle is necessary I won’t hesitate. But the death and destruction in

war still makes me afraid. When I was small I grew up in the Xiong Nu, but that doesn't make me a Xiong Nu person." He let out a sigh of relief "That's good. When I heard you singing, I was a little worried about you."

We entered a Han restaurant and the waiter asked if we wanted some wine. Huo Qu Bing stared at me while my face turned red, and he was awkward as well and declined, asking for just something to eat. He asked as we sat down "After we're done strolling through here, anywhere else you want to go?" I shook my head "No. Either this place is different than when I was a kid, or I've changed in the way I see things." He smiled "I think your feelings have changed. After dining let's hurry back to base then."

A drunken Xiong Nu man sprawled on the table and kept singing the blind man song and crying. Huo Qu Bing sighed "Why is it everywhere we go we hear this song?"

I pretend to make a startled expression and then tease him "Wow, this is even better than the literature and poems composed by the scholars. Looks like the Great General Huo's name will spread along with this song. Who knows if this song will be passed on for thousands of years, so that when people in the future hear this song, they can imagine the Great General Huo's power and valor. It will surely make them gape to witness such magnificence!" and I pointed to his forehead.

He lightly smiled and whispered in my ear "All I want is for you to gape at me." Before I can tease him, he's already teased me back. I breath in his smell and it makes my ears turn red. I quickly lower my eyes and focused on eating, avoiding looking at him.

The table next to us overheard me mention Huo Qu Bing and smiled at me and then toasted each other "This year is the year we Han people emerge victorious. In the Spring, General Huo used just ten thousand troops to capture Yen Zhi Mountain, and in the Summer he vanquished tens of thousands of Xiong Nu warriors to take Qi Lian Mountains." The other person sitting at the same table smirked at the drunk Xiong Nu "When I came here to do business as a child with my father, those barbarians were arrogant and condescending to us Han people for being weak. We needed to send them princesses to keep them placated. Now look who is afraid to fight whom."

Too bad the Xiong Nu man actually understood the Han language and got up in a rage, pointing to the two men "If you are a real Han man, then put your money where your mouth is. Let's go outside and fight. If you win, I'll give you my head and you can take it back to the Han dynasty to show off."

The Xiong Nu are proud people who treat death lightly, so this man meant it. The two Han men gritted their teeth and accepted the challenge. I was just enjoying this showdown when Huo Qu Bing grabbed my hand and used his eyes to gesture outside. I looked out the window and startled for a moment before fixing my veil. The drunken Xiong Nu walked outside and ran into a band of Xiong Nu just walking by the store and said to them "Brothers on the plains, I am Hei Shi To and I am about to fight two men who insulted the Xiong Nu. The Hans don't keep their promises so can you be my witness?"

Before Yi Zhi Xie can say anything, Mu Da Duo coldly huffed "Of course we can. Make sure they lose their heads." The news has spread and more people have gathered. The two Hans are starting to look scared and shoot pleading looks at the owner, who cannot help them because he needs to do business here.

Huo Qu Bing asked in a low voice “What did they just say?” I replied “Those two Hans will likely not survive. This is annoying. If they want to fight, then hurry up and fight and stop blocking this place.” Huo Qu Bing laughed “If it wasn’t running into someone you’re afraid to see, you’d be the first to get in line to watch the showdown.” I huffed at him “I’ve already let that emotional burden go. I’m not afraid to see him anymore. But I don’t want to incur any trouble, so one less complication is better than one more.”

From the street another Xiong Yu yelled out that since there were two Hans, they will send out another Xiong Yu to even the competition. The man who agreed to fight Hei Shi To was calm, but his companion was trembling with fear. The crowd laughed at him, and even Huo Qu Bing shot them an icy look.

One man introduced himself to Huo Qu Bing as Yu Xun and his companion as Chen Li, they are from Long Xi. If they lose this competition, they want to ask Huo Qu Bing as a fellow Han to send word to their families. Huo Qu Bing stared at the quaking Chen Li and noted that Long Xi is known for birthing great warriors of past and present generations, so it’s quite odd to see someone not fit the mold. Yu Xun looked at Chen Li with embarrassment, when suddenly Chen Li pointed to me and shouted “Her! She insulted the Xiong Nu, she said it first. She complimented Huo Qu Bing. I merely added a few words.”

Even with my back to the public, I can feel a hundred eyes suddenly trained on me. Because I was a girl, they turned their rage to Huo Qu Bing. Mu Da Duo suddenly gave a small gasp and quickly said “My lord, we should get going! There are too many people here, we shouldn’t linger.”

Before she finished talking, Yi Zhi Xie was walking into the store and smiled at Huo Qu Bing “What a small world.”

Huo Qu Bing sat there without moving, not responding to Yi Zhi Xie’s greeting. Yi Zhi Xie’s guard rushed forward and angrily said “Meeting the young master in Chang An, I was already itching (for a fight). I am Tie Niu Mu, and I’ve got a bit of brawn and want to compete with the young master.” Huo Qu Bing continued to sit there without moving, ignoring them and only looking at me.

“Hahaha, the Hans are all like that. All talk and no guts.” The people outside started to snicker and someone sarcastically said “When he was talking about others, he seemed like a real man, turns out he’s just a pile of dirt.”

I softly sighed. If we can’t avoid it, might as well face it head on. I smiled at Huo Qu Bing “Don’t worry about me, just do what you want!”

Huo Qu Bing nodded and stood up to face Tie Niu Mu “Competing with you won’t be fair. Have the best rider and archer in the Xiong Nu come compete with me. If I lose, you can have my head. If you lose, from now on, in this town, the Xiong Nu can never be insulting to the Hans. I hear the Xiong Nu believe in keeping their word. I won’t worry about any promises not being fulfilled.”

Since Tie Niu Mu is Yi Zhi Xie’s personal guard, he must be one of the best warriors in the Xiong Nu. But for Huo Qu Bing to deem him not worthy to compete, he was so enraged that his face was turning blue. Just as he was about to say something, Yi Zhi Xie shot him a look. He could only clench his fist and shoot deathly glares at Huo Qu Bing,

but said nothing.

A few hundred people are gathered outside the restaurant chattering like magpies. But faced with Huo Qu Bing's confident aura, everyone grew quiet. A second later, the Hans started cheering and straightened their spines, shooting proud looks at the Xiong Nu.

A few Xiong Nu and Xi Yu people who didn't understand the Han language asked around and got an explanation of what was said. They looked at Huo Qu Bing with newfounded admiration. Initially the Xiong Nu were each trying to be the one to compete, but now they looked at each other, unsure who had the ability to fight against him.

Hei Shi To yelled out "This lady may have complimented General Huo but she did not insult the Xiong Nu. General Huo is indeed powerful on horseback against us, and I have no choice but to admit he's a real man's man. If anyone wants to fight this young master, go ahead. But I'm still going to fight the other two guys and make them take back what they said."

Huo Qu Bing bowed to Hei Shi To "if I lose, then those two will naturally apologize to you." Chen Li quickly added "If he loses, then we will surely apologize." Yu Shun looked at Huo Qu Bing and then me, before saying to Hei Shi To "If he loses, then my head will be my apology."

The crowd gasped and Hei Shi To tempered his arrogance "Good man, I take back what I said earlier that the Hans can only talk but not act."

There are more and more Xiong Nu gathered but no one continued to shoot derisive looks at the Hans. Everyone whispered as to who would compete. Tie Niu Mu was angry and impatient, the veins in his hand popping. But one look at Yi Zhi Xie's face and he quietly stood still.

When Yi Zhi Xie last saw me, I was but 12 or 13 years old. Now I am full grown, my height and figure have greatly changed. Plus I'm wearing a veil and with my side profile to him. Yi Zhi Xie glanced over me before fixing his attention on Huo Qu Bing. His one glance over me caused Mu Da Duo's face to whiten. She purposely refused to look at me, though she couldn't help but sneak a peek, looking very torn.

Huo Qu Bing barely acknowledges everyone's eyes on him. He calmly sits down and sips his tea, smiling at me "What if I lose my head?" I smiled back "Then I'll just have to follow you down into the ground." Huo Qu Bing froze for a second, and without a care as to what other's might think, he tightly grasped my hand. I grabbed his hand back, the two of us just smiling and staring at each other.

The people outside are starting to get loud about who will compete when Yi Zhi Xie suddenly spoke up calmly and quietly "Will the young master consent to compete with me?" His voice isn't very loud, but suddenly all the arguing outside stopped. A thousand eyes turned to look at him. Seeing his aura, everyone stopped trying to argue for someone else.

All of Yi Zhi Xie's guards kneeled down and tried to plead with him. Tie Niu Mu begged "My lord, he is not worthy of you personally doing this. Any one of us will be fine. If you don't think I can do it, then let Zhen Tai go, I won't fight for this opportunity with him."

Mu Da Duo was staring at my hands entwined with Huo Qu Bing, her face a mixture of happiness and worry. When she heard what Yi Zhi Xie said, she gasped, seemingly wanting to plead with him but finally not saying anything.

Huo Qu Bing felt my hand stiffen, and he ignored Yi Zhi Xie's question and quickly looked at me. Yi Zhi Xie's riding and archery skills are the best of the best in the Xiong Nu. I thought he might notice Huo Qu Bing, but since he is the Shan Yu of the Xiong Nu, he will just send one of his warriors to compete. Who knew he was just like Huo Qu Bing, always pulling the unexpected. This really has become a life and death situation. But the person holding my hand is Huo Qu Bing. Even in the face of life or death, he would never back away.

I held Huo Qu Bing's hand and suddenly smiled widely. He looked surprised and then smiled back at me. He held my hand and stood up, facing Yi Zhi Xie "I don't have a horse or a bow and arrow. I will bother you to please prepare it."

Yi Zhi Xie gave a small smile "If you lose, I don't want your head. I just want you to work for me, and not as a master and servant. I will treat you like a brother, and I will still persuade the Xiong Nu of this region to respect the Hans."

Yi Zhi Xie's guards and Mu Da Duo all gasped, and the Xiong Nu on the street looked at Yi Zhi Xie, and then at Huo Qu Bing. Huo Qu Bing just laughed "What an honor to have you look upon me thusly. But I must apologize, I am a Han person and in this entire world, I will only work for the Han. If I lose, all I can give you is just my head!"

Yi Zhi Xie was silent for a moment and then smiled towards my joined hands with Huo Qu Bing "Your lady wife is a Gui Su person? The culture of the Gui Su and the Xiong Nu are quite similar....." I cut off the rest of his sentence, lightly biting my tongue to say "Whatever he wishes to do, is what I wish to do."

Yi Zhi Xie's eyes flashed a sudden shock and he kept staring at my eyes. I smiled and directly met his eyes back. I didn't avoid him, with no fear or hatred, just a look without any emotion. Like the look one might give a stranger who was staring.

Mu Da Duo was so nervous she was actually shaking. After some time, Yi Zhi Xie looked disappointed and a bit saddened, shaking his head and then turning to walk away. His guards hurried to keep up.

Huo Qu Bing and I held hands and followed behind them. Everyone on the street parted to let us through. The guards turned to look at me, shooting me pitiful and sympathetic stares. Mu Du Duo kept glancing at me, indicating that I need to leave. I pretended not to see and continued on my way.

Huo Qu Bing whispered to me "Is his archery skills top notch? Why are those guys staring at me like I'm a dead fish?" I smiled and nodded "Very top notch, the best of the best." He says a soft "Oh" and then confidently continued to walk forward.

Tie Niu Mu brought over a horse with a bow and arrow. Huo Qu Bing picked up the bow and arrow and tried it out. He held the reins and looked at me. I smiled back "I will be here waiting for you."

He leaped on the horse and with a brilliant smile "Wonderful Yu Er, thank you! With a

wife like you, that is all I can ask for.” And then he was off, with the bow on his back, never once looking back.

Mu Da Duo sidled up next to me, staring into the distance, softly saying “Big sister, so that night on the streets of Chang An, we had already met. Shan.....my lord’s martial arts prowess is something you are familiar with. Aren’t you scared? He’s also a strange one. It’s clear to see how much he likes big sister, and this time out determines life and death, yet he never once looked back at you.”

I smiled but didn’t respond. How can I not be afraid? But there are some things in life that must be done even if there is fear.

In the sky, a flock of wild geese flew overhead. Yi Zhi Xie told the people setting up the targets to stop, smiling as he pointed to the sky “How about we use the flock of wild geese to determine the winner. In the time of half an incense stick, the one who shoots down more wins.” Huo Qu Bing smiled and nodded.

The incense was lit and the two of them took off towards the wild geese. Their first arrows were released at almost the exact same time. The two of them have to ride lightening fast and chase the geese which are flying everywhere, and they have to release their arrows quickly before the geese fly out of shooting range.

Such vivid competition far exceeds the excitement of watching arrows hit a target. Over a thousand people have gathered to watch, everyone is silent and holding their breaths watching the two men on horse back. All we can hear on the plains are the sound of horse hooves and the cries of the wild geese.

My worry disrupts me. I doubt there is anyone here with better eyesight than me, but I actually lose count of how many Huo Qu Bing has shot down. I glance at Mu Da Duo and she also looks distressed, shaking her head “I can’t keep count, I’ve already lost count. If I knew, I would have just counted Shan.....my lord’s hits.”

Initially I was nervously looking between Yi Zhi Xie and then Huo Qu Bing, crying out in my heart to hurry, hurry, please hurry. But suddenly I relaxed. If everything was already determined, then why fret. I stopped looking at Yi Zhi Xie and just stared at Huo Qu Bing. Whether it is him riding fast or the wild geese flying fast, I just quietly admire his stance on his horse and his form as he pulls the bow. Little by little, I engrave this image in my heart.

Half a stick of incense passes and there is a call of “Time’s up!” The two men immediately halt their taut bows and head back. Yi Zhi Xie’s guards are already collecting the dead geese. Everyone looks worriedly at the people collecting the geese. Yet Huo Qu Bing and Yi Zhi Xie pay no heed to that and ride back side-by-side just laughing and talking. Whatever they said to each other, it caused both of them to roar in laughter, showcasing their confident spirits.

After jumping off the horse, Yi Zhi Xie complimented Huo Qu Bing “What superb archery skills, what excellent riding skills!” Huo Qu Bing, who normally has no idea what the word modest means, actually bows back and laughs “Likewise, likewise.”

The guards have returned to announce the tally “The white arrow shot down twenty-two, the black arrow shot down....twenty-three.”

Everyone gasped out loud, some looking happy, others looking sad. My heart lurched and then immediately calmed. I give the most loving look towards Huo Qu Bing. When he hears the tally, he can't help but smile. He turns to look at me, apologetic. I smile and nod to him, and he smiles and nods back.

Yi Zhi Xie solemnly gives a Xiong Nu respectful bow to Huo Qu Bing, very sincerely asking him "Please reconsider what I offered earlier." He was bowing to Huo Qu Bing in the position of the Shan Yu, and everyone around him looked shocked and stunned. Huo Qu Bing laughed "I already said before that I am a Han person. I will only do what a Han person wants. I am willing to gamble and pay the price. You don't need to say anything more."

When he was done talking, he ignored everyone and took big steps towards me. In front of everyone he pulled me into his embrace, half lifted my veil, and lowered his head and kissed me. The buzzing around us ceased and turned to silence.

In the silent plains, even the wind appears to have stopped. All I can hear is his heartbeat and my heartbeat. Everything faded from my heart, so that in this entire world there was only him and me, me and him.

In a brief moment, it felt like an entire lifetime. From the first time I saw him and our eyes met until this very moment, all these memories flashed through my mind. In this moment I finally knew, that in the little by little, in the unaware and the subconscious, he had already permanently carved himself on my heart.

At the cusp of losing him, I finally understood how much I fear losing him. My heart hurts, hurts so much that my body shakes in his embrace. But.....the heavens are cruel sometimes. So all I can do is use every ounce of my passion to kiss him back. Let him know my heart.

This is our first real kiss, and it will become be our last real kiss. He embraced me with all his might, and I embraced him back with everything I've got. But even the most intimate moments must end, and he slowly pulled away from my lips. He tenderly fixed my veil "Yu Er, promise me one thing, send my coffin back to Chang An, I don't want to perish in a foreign land. And someone is there looking for....." His eyes flashed pain and a complicated array of emotions, but he didn't finish what he was saying. He warmly smiled "Promise me, you must go back to Chang An."

I know he's scared that I'll do what I joked about earlier and follow him to the ground, so he's purposely making me promise to do this. I could care less what he's saying, but to make him at ease, I lightly nodded my head. But in my heart I had already decided.

My heart was shattering into a million small pieces, and each piece is like the sharpest pin that flows through my blood and making my entire body hurt. But I have to be brave and smile before him. I want the last thing he sees is a smiling me, a beautiful me. I don't want him to worry about me.

He silently stared at me for some time, his eyes reflecting a million types of longing. In the end he kissed me on the forehead and slowly released me. He turned to Yi Zhi Xie's guard and laughed "Can I borrow a large sword."

The Xiong Nu may be bold, but everyone is still stunned to see this wholly brave and

unheard of gesture. Mu Da Duo stares slack jawed and turns to look at me. I smile at her, and then leap to her side and grab the dagger on her waist. “I need to borrow this! And in a bit I’ll be needing to ask little sister a favor.”

Mu Da Duo’s face lost all color and she bit her lips, wanting to counsel me. But she turned to look at Yi Zhi Xie and she kept her silence. Yi Zhi Xie and his guards stood still for some moments before Tie Niu Mu unsheathed his sword. Huo Qu Bing accepted the sword and swung it towards his neck. I know I ought to shut my eyes, but I will never miss the final moment of looking at him. I open my eyes wide and suck in my breath. As the sword swung towards his neck, it also swung towards my neck. The scent of death comes toward us.

Yi Zhi Xie suddenly shouted “Wait a moment.” Yi Zhi Xie looked at the collected wild geese and the two guards who collected it. The two immediately knelt down. My heart lurched and I could care less about anything else at this moment. I rushed past Yi Zhi Xie and started flipping through the dead geese.

All of the white arrows penetrated the geese between its eyes, while all the black arrows hit the geese through the chest and straight for the heart. Except for one goose, which was shot between the eyes but it was a black arrow. I had my suspicions, but this is not something that can be proven, unless Yi Zhi Xie himself.....

Yi Zhi Xie was calm and he appears to have a small smile. He took a handkerchief from Mu Da Muo and cleaned his hands, smiling at the two men kneeling on the ground. A flash of silver light as fast as lightning, and one man had already lost his head, which rolled on the ground a few times. The onlookers all gasped and immediately fell silent, looking at Yi Zhi Xie with great fear.

Killing someone isn’t unusual for the warriors of the world to see. But to kill someone with a smile, so gracefully and without even seeming to dirty himself, is rare indeed. It was like he merely waved his hand and plucked a flower. The other kneeling guard was sprayed with blood but continued calmly kneeling without moving a muscle.

Yi Zhi Xie stared at his own sword until the last drop of blood fell. Then he put the sword back in its sheath. Calmly and gently he asked, like he was talking with a friend “Tell me the truth.”

The guard bowed and spoke with his voice shaking “When we were collecting the wild geese, because.....we were too bold and plucked off a white arrow and replaced it with a black arrow when no one was looking.” Yi Zhi Xie smiled “You have been by my side for many years, you know what I hate the most.”

All the other guards kneeled, wanting to beg forgiveness but unable to speak. Tie Niu Mu looked at Mu Da Duo but she just shook her head. Yi Zhi Xie turned away from the kneeling guard and went to speak to Huo Qu Bing, apologizing “I can’t believe my servant would do something like this.” Huo Qu Bing replied “Brother you have quite the honorable spirit.”

The covered in blood guard bowed three times to Yi Zhi Xie’s back before grabbing a sword and stabbing himself through the chest. Everyone gasped but then quieted when Yi Zhi Xie looked around. Everyone looked down and avoided meeting Yi Zhi Xie’s eyes. Yi

Zhi Xie glanced at the dead guard and said “Make sure his family is well taken care of.”

A competition has ended on this note, so that even if the Han onlookers are pleased, they still look upon Yi Zhi Xie with some trepidation. Everyone stays quiet or starts slipping away. The Xiong Nu look crestfallen and slowly shuffle off. The Xi Yu people are long used to being stuck between the fighting of the Hans and the Xiong Nu, so this isn’t anything new to them, and they all disperse as well.

With such a sharp rise and fall in what just happened, just then I was focused on letting him not worry about me since my mind was set, it was just a matter of who went first and who followed. But now my heart has relaxed, and the thought that if it was just one second later, he would have.....before my eyes..... I just stare at him in a daze.

Huo Qu Bing is also staring at me, and when our eyes meet, we smile and start walking at the same moment towards each other. We reach for each other’s hand, and without a word, having the same thought, we turn and start walking away.

Yi Zhi Xie called out behind us “Please wait a moment. May I have your names?” Huo Qu Bing laughed “Just a chance encounter, if we are fated we’ll meet again. Our names are not worth mentioning.”

Yi Zhi Xie laughed “I am genuinely trying to make a friend in you both. Just a friend. Setting aside everything else, it’s been a long time since I met a kindred spirit, and enjoyed myself so much. I would like to treat you both to a feast and we can get drunk.” Huo Qu Bing replied “I am also in admiration of brother’s honor and confidence. But we have something pending and we need to rush to meet our family merchant caravan. We really can’t stay.”

Yi Zhi Xie sighed “Then I must hope that we are destined to meet again.” He ordered two horses brought over, and one horse even has the bow and arrow from earlier. It was his gift “Since you are in such a rush, please don’t decline this.”

These are rare horse flesh indeed, and Huo Qu Bing isn’t one to pretend to be reserved, so he laughed and accepted it “We’re not deserving, but thank you.”

We rode the horses and took off, and after riding some distance away, Huo Qu Bing turned around to look at Yi Zhi Xie “That man was some personage! Looking at his every gesture, he must have already suspected his guards when the tally was announced. But to force me to work for him, he kept silent until the very last second to reveal the truth. He is calculating and doesn’t trust anybody, vicious and cold. Yet there is honor in him. I can’t figure him out!”

I startled and said “But seeing the way you behaved back there, you seemed to compliment him and didn’t have this level of understanding. You acted like he was just any warrior.....” Before I finished, I understood what had happened. The competition between Huo Qu Bing and Yi Zhi Xie was a real life and death battle only after they finished shooting down the geese. Before they were just competing on physical skill, but afterwards they were competing on mental tactics. If Huo Qu Bing made one wrong move and Yi Zhi Xie became suspicious, then likely what Yi Zhi Xie gave us wouldn’t have been these two horses.

A lone horse suddenly rode past us, and the man on that horse gave Huo Qu Bing a glance

and his entire expression changed. Huo Qu Bing immediately whipped my horse and his with a laugh “Looks like one wave is starting before the other wave has calmed down. Yu Er, we have to escape for our lives now. That man who just passed us is the former Han general Zhao Xin. He recognized me, and they won’t let me leave here alive. I just hope there isn’t a Xiong Nu army nearby. I’m not afraid of those ten or so people back there.”

I rode faster and smiled bitterly “There.....there is likely a Xiong Nu army nearby. It might not be a lot, but it will surely be the best of the best.” I turned to look back. Zhao Xin had jumped off the horse and bowed to Yi Zhi Xie, and immediately Yi Zhi Xie and everyone got right on their horses.

Huo Qu Bing laughed “Just like I suspected. That man must be a high ranking official in the Xiong Nu.” The Xiong Nu chasing us have increased greatly in numbers and the sound of horses thundering causes the entire plain to tremble. I said “His.....name is Yi Zhi Xie” and I bit my lip.

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Chapter 22: Fleeing

Huo Qu Bing said “Ah” before asking “The Shan Yu of the Xiong Nu?”

I nodded and he was silent for awhile before suddenly laughing “What an exhilarating day this turned out to be. I actually beat the Xiong Nu’s Shan Yu. Too bad we have to flee for our lives now.”

I looked around as I urged my horse faster “This area is just open plains and we can’t hide. If we can enter the Qi Lian Mountains, I’ll have a way to shake them. The hundreds of miles of Qi Lian Mountain ranges, along with the help of the wolf pack, no one is more familiar with that area than me.” Huo Qu Bing smiled and agreed.

The horses Yi Zhi Xie gave us are indeed prime horse flesh. After riding for a few hours, it’s starting to get tired but continues to thunder ahead at full speed. But the pursuing army behind us can change horses, so they continue to bridge the distance between us.

If they don’t shoot at us, we might have a shot. But if they shoot..... Just as I was thinking this, Huo Qu Bing suddenly tried to pull me on his horse to ride in front of him. I pushed him away angrily “What’s faster. Two people on two mounts or two people on one? Who do you think I am? When you were practicing archery in the Yu Lin Army, I was already escaping for my life on these plains. I don’t need you to use your back to block arrows for me.”

Huo Qu Bing hesitated and agreed “Fine! But you can’t let them hurt you.” The Qi Lian Mountains are coming into view a distance away, so Huo Qu Bing and I get our energy back up. But behind us the arrows are starting to fly, though it is aimed for our horses. Looks like Yi Zhi Xie wants to capture Huo Qu Bing alive no matter what.

Huo Qu Bing uses one hand to control the horse and his other to deflect the arrows with his bow. I also use my sash to deflect the arrows near my horse. He smiled “Yu Er, help me deflect the arrows” and then he picked up three arrows in one hand and released it behind him. It flew out like shooting stars and the closest three horses whined and collapsed on the ground.

I used my sash to deflect the arrows and smiled at him “Excellent archery skill, you hit the horses directly in the forehead.” Huo Qu Bing proudly winked at me “I thank my madam wife for the compliment.” I coldly huffed and retracted my sash, leaving him scrambling to deflect the arrows.

Watching him fussing, I almost started to laugh, when suddenly an arrow came towards

me aimed for my back. I shifted to avoid the arrow, but then a flurry of arrows continued to come towards me, all of them aimed for my vital parts. I concentrated now and used the sash to deflect the arrows. The arrows flying towards Huo Qu Bing continue to aim for his horse, and he yelled in rage “If you want to shoot, shoot me!”

When I turn back, I see Mu Da Duo with her arrow aimed at my throat. I couldn’t believe it. In my shock one arrow slips through and Huo Qu Bing has no choice but to reach over and deflect it. His horse is shot, but the arrow only makes it go faster.

“Yu Er!” he angrily yelled at me. I turned and saw his expression and it immediately woke me up “I’m sorry, it won’t happen again.”

Mu Da Duo continues to send arrow after arrow towards me, and I continue to avoid it. Her face is expressionless and now I am also calm, my movements swift and sure. But....but I couldn’t understand. Where was the person who called me big sister, where did she go? Was there only betrayal on these plains?

Mu Da Duo ordered the person next to her, who hesitated for a moment, and then also began to aim directly for me rather than for my horse. Yi Zhi Xie suddenly appeared “Duo Er, what are you doing?”

Mu Da Duo’s hand shook and she didn’t look at Yi Zhi Xie “Shan Yu, we want to capture Huo Qu Bing alive and use this to shake the entire Han dynasty and invigorate the Xiong Nu. But this woman is useless. We can do this to disrupt Huo Qu Bing’s concentration, and it will help us in capturing him.”

Yi Zhi Xie said nothing so Zhao Xin piped up “The Shan Yu values talent and wants Huo Qu Bing to defect. But Huo Qu Bing’s personality will never consent. If the Shan Yu wants to capture Huo Qu Bing alive, what the queen said makes sense.” Yi Zhi Xie looked at Huo Qu Bing and then nodded. Huo Qu Bing saw my face change and worriedly asked “What were they discussing?”

I see that we are almost at the base of the Qi Lian Mountains so I forced a smile “I’m going to take a gamble. If I’m right, then maybe we’ll earn us an opportunity.” Huo Qu Bing nodded “But don’t do anything stupid. I won’t accept it. Either we live together or we die together.”

“I know!” and I slowly reached for my face veil, staring at Mu Da Duo. She finally lost her calm and a look of fear passed through her face. Her hands swiftly sent more arrows towards me. Seeing her behavior, then my suspicion is probably correct.

My veil floated away in the air and I smiled back at Yi Zhi Xie. His expression changed immediately and he hollered “Stop!” He looked confused and dazed. My horse leaped into the Qi Lian Mountains and Huo Qu Bing’s horse followed.

Yi Zhi Xie looked at Mu Da Duo “Duo Er, did you see that? Was that....was that Yu Jin?”

With a few hundred soldiers chasing us, suddenly there were no arrows shooting at us. Mu Da Duo cried “I.....I don’t know. But it shouldn’t be. Shan Yu, Yu Jin is dead. If she was really Yu Jin, she wouldn’t be like this.”

Yi Zhi Xie blankly nodded “She ought to hate me, and not smile at me.” He suddenly shouted at me “Yu Jin, is that you? Is that really you?” I laughed back at him “What do

you think?"

Zhao Xin bowed to Yi Zhi Xie on respectfully said "Your humble servant doesn't know who that girl is, but none of that is important. Shan you, the person we want to capture is Huo Qu Bing."

Yi Zhi Xie suddenly snapped out of it, and I glared at Zhao Xin. If anything happened to us, then I will make sure to drag you down with me. Yi Zhi Xie stared at the Qi Lian Mountains and coldly ordered "A million pieces of gold to anyone who kills Huo Qu Bing. But do not hurt that girl." The hate from Mu Da Duo's eyes hit me like fiery daggers, sending a shiver up my spine.

"Qu Bing!" at the edge of life and death, we have no time to waste. I exchanged a look with him and we both leaned on our horses. A flurry of arrows like the rain came flying towards Huo Qu Bing. I used my sash to deflect it for him, but in a second his horse has been shot through and falls to the ground.

The moment the horse collapsed, he grabbed my sash and used the pull to leap towards the forest. The moment we entered the hillside, he immediately dove between the trees and pulled his bow. In a flash three arrows flew out and three more horses collapsed. The road is narrow in this mountain range and the fallen horses send the pursuers into a disarray.

I slapped my horse and let it fly while I leaped into the forest. I glanced over and saw Yi Zhi Xie pulling back his bow. I turn to look in the direction Huo Qu Bing went, seeing that it is dense and hard to see through. Yi Zhi Xie cannot see Huo Qu Bing at all, but he calculated in the direction where Huo Qu Bing launched his arrows and used that to lock in his target. He sends three arrows flying, all aimed to kill in three different vital organs. Huo Qu Bing managed to deflect two, but the third hits him.

I tightly bit my lip and refrain from making any noise. I run up to assist Huo Qu Bing and he just smiles and shakes his head at me, indicating that he can walk. I nodded and we started running. I let out a few low howls and got the wolves in the forest to answer back. I feel some relief, but when I turn back, I see that half his shirt is soaked through with blood.

The howling in the forest grows louder. Huo Qu Bing follows behind me, and when we reach a creek, I stop to examine his wound. I want to pull the arrow out but he tells me to wait. He runs around the entire creek once, and then jumps in the water, telling me now to pull out the arrow.

I use my sash to bind his elbow, and with my teeth clenched, I swiftly pull out the arrow. His blood splurts out and falls into the creek, quickly washing away. He smiled as usual and showed me how to bind the wound so it would stop bleeding yet not affect his movement. I'm used to seeing blood, but seeing his blood flying turns me dizzy and my hands weak. I don't want him to have to reassure me at this time, so I try to look calm and keep my hands still. I bandage him up without saying a word.

To hide our scent, we walk in the water upstream. Because Yi Zhi Xie's is so strong, the wound was very deep. Even after bandaging, it still continues to bleed. Even though Huo Qu Bing looks fine, but his face is growing ever more pale. I looked around "It's almost dark, we need to find a place to rest." He nodded.

Suddenly a black form darted out, and I gasped and placed myself in front of Huo Qu Bing. He also turned and protected me. We have the exact same instinct, fearful that the other person will be harmed. When I see that it is Brother Wolf, I am so happy and run to embrace him. Brother Wolf leads us a way to a small waterfall. He howled to me and then ran under the waterfall.

I held Huo Qu Bing's hand and we walked under the waterfall together. Who knew there was a cave behind the waterfall. It's a little damp, but a good place to hide out. A normal person would never suspect there was a cave behind this waterfall. This area being so damp, even a tracking dog would lose our scent.

I picked a higher area and had Huo Qu Bing sit down. I checked his arm before turning to leave "There should be leaves nearby that can stop the bleeding. I'll go find some." He immediately stopped me "I can handle this little wound. Yi Zhi Xie is intent on capturing me. Even if you have the wolves scaring them off, but the animals are still no match for trained soldiers. We haven't shaken them yet....."

I covered his mouth "Because we haven't shaken them is why I need to staunch your bleeding. If you keep losing blood, do you want me to piggyback you and escape? As a General, don't you know what is more important?" He stared at me and didn't say a word. I laughed "I'll take Brother Wolf with me. Don't worry, nothing will happen."

He handed the bow and arrow to me "Do you know how to shoot?" I wanted to decline, but then to let him feel more at ease, I accepted it "I know how."

A bright clear moon out, the creek waters are rushing, the insects are humming. It's a beautiful Summer night, giving off the illusion that there is no danger.

Brother Wolf swiftly bounds between the grass and rocks, with me following him and leaping to catch up. I grab some fruit to eat along the way. Brother Wolf's eyesight is better than mine and he spots the healing grass first. I actually don't know that the grass is called, I just know the wolves use it to heal when they are hurt, so I call it the healing grass.

I bit down on the fruit as I race back towards the waterfall. Just before I reach the waterfall, Brother Wolf let out a warning howl and protectively crouched in front of me. He faced off with a few large black dogs.

Yi Zhi Xie and Mu Da Duo walk out of the trees. We face each other with Brother Wolf and the dogs between us. My eyes dart all around, seemingly to check if they brought more men, but really to assess whether they noticed the waterfall.

Yi Zhi Xie looked at me without talking, so Mu Da Duo asked "Where is Huo Qu Bing?" I tossed the eaten fruit aside "To distract your attention, we split up." Mu Da Duo looked at Yi Zhi Xie, while Yi Zhi Xie stared at my eyes, not wavering for a moment. Mu Da Duo's face starts to turn white. Yi Zhi Xie softly asked, as if making a loud noise will scare me away "Are you Yu Jin?"

After so many years, he's barely changed. He is still the Xiong Nu's most handsome man. But I am no longer the girl who gazed adoringly at him. I was silent and then I shook my head "I'm not." Mu Da Duo appeared to let out a pent up breath. Yi Zhi Xie wanted to walk forward but Brother Wolf gave him a loud piercing warning howl. The entire forest

lit up with howls.

I was so angry I kicked Brother Wolf. I howled once and the howling ceased in the forest. Behind the waterfall, Huo Qu Bing might not know what is happening out here. But with Brother Wolf's meddling, Huo Qu Bing clearly must be aware now.

Yi Zhi Xie slowly walked towards me, one step at a time. My words were intended for Huo Qu Bing, so I shouted at Yi Zhi Xie "Don't come any closer. If you come closer, I will.....I will..." I pointed the arrow tip at my heart "I will kill myself." Yi Zhi Xie hurriedly backed up a few steps, joyfully saying "You are Yu Jin."

I looked at Mu Da Duo and asked "Yi Zhi Xie, whether or not I am Yu Jin, is that important? If I am Yu Jin, what you are you going to do?" He looked dazed still, murmuring "You're still alive. You are actually still alive." He stared at me as to confirm that I was really there "But you don't hate me?"

I laughed "I already said I am not Yu Jin. Yu Jin is dead. The me today has no relationship to you. The person you want to capture is Huo Qu Bing. If you are still that great and honorable young lord, then don't pressure a simple girl like me. Let me go!"

Yi Zhi Xie spoke to me in Xiong Nu, but I kept responding in Han language to let Huo Qu Bing understand that I was trying to extricate myself and he needs to stay calm. Yi Zhi Xie looked up at the moon, while Mu Da Duo just stared at him with her eyes filled with unshed tears.

Yi Zhi Xie's sleeve billowed in the wind and he smiled at the moon "Yu Jin, I wish that when you saw me, you would strike me. I wish that you were filled with hatred for me. That would prove that I was always in your heart, and you had never forgotten me. But....but I could never have imagined that you would look at me like I was a stranger."

He lowered his head and looked into my eyes "No matter what the occasion, whether it was the Shan Yu or the Crown Prince, when everyone else paid attention to them, you only had eyes for me. It was filled with admiration, and trust. You were still young, but it was like your eyes understood everything. My hurt, my tolerance, my anxiety, you saw everything in your eyes. You would be sad for me, you would be happy for me. Is all of that gone now?"

I unconsciously touched my eyes, and then looked at Mu Da Duo "Perhaps in the past Yu Jin looked at you that way, but now there is someone else who looks at you that way. What she sees is different than what Yu Jin saw, but in her eyes there is only you." Yi Zhi Xie turned to look at Mu Da Duo, and she stopped resisting and her tears spilled forth. Yi Zhi Xie looked conflicted in that moment, and he took out a handkerchief for her.

He suddenly said "Yu Jin, since you don't hate me, then come home with me"."

I laugh and reply in Xiong Nu "Unless you want to see me dead and cart back a corpse, then go ahead!" And then I switched to Han "Yi Zhi Xie, my Papa was a Han person. You know he always wanted me to go back to the Han dynasty. I am really happy there right now. Don't force me, if you have any regret left in you."

Yi Zhi Xie asked "Huo Qu Bing just left you and took off? Did you.....marry him? Forget it, that doesn't matter to us Xiong Nu."

I was getting angry “He did leave me. You shot him with your arrow and he can’t move fast. He didn’t want to burden me, so he lied that he couldn’t move and needed me to go find some food. When I got back, he was gone.” I bit my lip and tears came to my eyes. “Don’t let me find him, otherwise I’ll shoot another arrow into him.”

My words sounded real enough based on our personalities, and Yi Zhi Xie clearly believed me. He was silent and started walking towards me, ignoring Brother Wolf’s warning “Yu Jin, come back with me.”

His eyes were steady and unwavering, causing me to lose my calm and I pointed my arrow at him “Don’t come closer, I will never go back with you.” He smiled and shook his head “Yu Jin, you want to use the arrow that I taught you how to use to shoot me? Remember when you were small, you sat in front of me on a horse, I held your hand and taught you how to shoot....”

He continued to walk calmly towards me, ignoring the arrow in my hand. A few dogs surrounded Brother Wolf. My hands were shaking and I said in Xiong Nu “Stop. I won’t go back with you. I wont.....” I heard Brother Wolf’s howl, telling me that Huo Qu Bing is getting close to us. I was so nervous that before I could think clearly, the arrow had flown out.

I stare in fear at the arrow, while Yi Zhi Xie pins a look of despair and disbelief at me. Mu Da Duo flew forward and collapsed on the ground in a soft thud. Yi Zhi Xie was stunned for a moment before realizing what happened. He looked at Mu Da Duo with fear and went to pick her up.

I walked over to them “I’m sorry, Mu Da Duo, I.....” I couldn’t continue. How did we come to try and kill each other? I suddenly started viciously hitting Yi Zhi Xie. With his skills, he didn’t avoid me and allowed my fists to rain over his body “It’s you, why do you have to keep doing these things. Why do you force us so that we can’t live in harmony. Why didn’t you let my Papa go? Why didn’t you let me go? And now because of you, us sisters have turned against each other.....”

Yi Zhi Xie didn’t respond to what I said, only looking down at Mu Da Duo’s wound. She took a few deep breaths and looked at me “Big sister, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t hate you. It has nothing to do with you. I even hired Xi Yu people to go to Chang An....” I shook my head at her “It’s not your fault, it’s all Yi Zhi Xie’s fault.”

Her tears kept falling “It’s not his fault, it’s all me. He cherishes me only because my personality is so similar to yours, and he’s filled with so much guilt towards you. I was just envious, it was my fault....”

Yi Zhi Xie covered Mu Da Duo’s mouth “Don’t say anymore. Yu Jin is right, it’s my fault.” He whistled and picked Mu Da Duo up and walked away “Duo Er, you won’t die. I’ll make sure you live. Didn’t you always want to go to the lake with me to play? When you’re all better, let’s go immediately.”

Yi Zhi Xie turned around and looked at me, like there was a million things he wanted to say. Mu Da Duo held his arm and coughed “Re....really? My body feels so cold, so cold....” Yi Zhi Xie looked down at Mu Da Duo “Really. I will take you to a doctor immediately. You’ll be fine....” He carried Mu Da Duo farther until they were already at

the trees. He turned back to look at me, but then a violent cough from Mu Da Duo made her bleed more. He didn't hesitate anymore and quickly disappeared into trees.

Under the cold wind and the lonely moon, I stand there staring in a daze at where they disappeared. Huo Qu Bing embraced me from behind "If she gets to a doctor in time, she'll live. Even though she lost a lot of blood, the arrow didn't hit a vital area. And when you were shooting you didn't intend to kill and your hands were shaky. The arrow likely didn't pierce her very deep."

Bleeding? I immediately cleared my head and looked around, quickly pulling him back into the cave with me. I gave him the fruit and then applied the medicine on his wound. Huo Qu Bing said "Tear off pieces of your robe and tie it on the wolves. Have them run around the areas you've been. Because Yi Zhi Xie has to consider how that girl feels, he can't come for you. But he will absolutely send people back to find you. Let's stay here and not leave for the next three days until they have completely searched the area." I did as he suggested.

The medicine worked like a charm and his bleeding has stopped. I feel relieved and suddenly remembered what just happened. "Mu Da Duo will be fine?" He laughed and hugged me "The powerful Shan Yu can't save the life of a girl? She'll be fine. You're just fazed right now, but if you think clearly about what just happened, don't you realize that the girl was intending that. In a short moment she used a very powerful tactic to win. How could a girl like that die?"

I was silent and then snuggled into his embrace "I'm sorry. We should have left immediately after we visited Papa. I shouldn't have wanted to go play, causing all this trouble." Huo Qu Bing caressed my cheek and smiled "I'm the one who should be sorry. My lady wife wants to go play and I didn't protect her properly, causing my lady wife to be alarmed. After I chase the Xiong Nu out of the Desert South and it falls under Han rule, then you can play all you want and never get bothered."

I grabbed his hand and bit it hard. He howled that it hurt and I chided him "Don't you dare call me lady wife again." He thought and then said "Then darling wifey?" I acted like I wanted to bite him again so he quickly said "Yu Er, I'll call you Yu Er." I glared at him and then started laughing with my face pressed against his hand. Before I finished laughing, I was already crying.

He didn't say anything and just stroked my hair "Qu Bing, you should know who Yu Dan was, right? My Papa was his teacher. I am not Papa's real daughter, just someone he brought back from the wolf pack. Back then I didn't want to be there.....the first time I met Yi Zhi Xie, he....."

This was the first time I discussed my own past. When I got to a happy part, I would laugh and laugh, and when I got to a sad part, my tears wouldn't stop flowing. From the moment I heard that Papa died and I cried for days, I have never cried about the past before. I was afraid that I wasn't strong enough, and if I started crying then all my courage would disappear. I pretended that I wasn't sad and tried to live my life. But today I'm not afraid. I can cry and laugh as much as I like. In talking and talking, I actually don't even remember when I fell asleep.

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7

Chapter 23: Football

“What are you thinking about?” Huo Qu Bing tenderly asked. I pulled back my gaze and lowered the carriage curtain, turning back to smile at him “I’m going to miss Brother Wolf.” Huo Qu Bing held my hand “We do need to thank Brother Wolf for getting us out of Qi Lian Mountains, but I feel like you’re more reluctant to return to Chang An.” I furrowed my brows but didn’t respond. He was silent for some time before saying “I also don’t want to return to Chang An.” I thought about it and realized his meaning. My heart ached for him so I laughed “You’re the only one who thinks I’m a treasure. No one will be fighting you for me.”

Huo Qu Bing smiled and then pulled me into his embrace without another word. My head rested on his knees and I wearily closed my eyes. Huo Qu Bing slightly shifted and made me more comfortable “If you’re tired just sleep awhile.” I replied “It’s stuffy to ride in a carriage. If you’re bored you can go ride a horse. You don’t need to keep me company.” He gently rubbed my forehead “How could I possibly get bored when I’m facing you. Just get some rest.” I fell asleep with a smile on my face.

Right when I’m sleeping soundly I hear Zhao Puo Nu whispering in a low voice “General.” Huo Qu Bing raised the curtain “Is there news?” I glanced at Huo Qu Bing and then quickly scrambled up. Huo Qu Bing smiled and lightly patted my back, and then turned back to Zhao Puo Nu and Chen An Kang. They were riding alongside us. When they saw us immediately separate inside the carriage, Chen An Kang smiled and looked elsewhere, but Zhao Puo Nu looked alarmed and then reported that Li Guang and Zhang Ying have made contact. Li Guang’s army barely set out before they were met with forty thousand Xiong Nu forces from the Xiong Nu’s Left Sage King.

I sucked in my breath. The Xiong Nu place the left in the highest position, so the Left Sage King commands the most elite forces behind the Shan Yu’s own forces. Li Gan is with his father, so is he alright? Huo Qu Bing glanced at me but didn’t say anything. Zhao Puo Nu explained that Li Gan refused to back down in the face of a larger force and managed to penetrate into the Xiong Nu army and single handedly kill over 200 warriors, using his bravery to urge the Han army to withstand the siege and hang on until the backup army of Zhang Ying arrived.

Li Gan held down the fort for over a day until the backup army arrived and chased the Xiong Nu forces away. Huo Qu Bing was thrilled to hear of Li Gan’s valor, though he scoffed at how slow the back up army had to be crawling along to arrive so late. Huo Qu

Bing confirmed that Li Guang's army was under siege so he couldn't assist Huo Qu Bing, but what about Gong Xun Aou's forces? Chen An Kang confirmed that, just as Huo Qu Bing suspected, Gong Xun Aou's forces got lost in the desert. Huo Qu Bing laughed that his uncle is surely going to face a head ache when he gets back.

Zhao Puo Nu cheerfully suggested that this foray was to chase the Xiong Nu out of the River West area and we have succeeded at that mission. Even though General Li Guang and General Gong Xun Aou did not end up participating, the Emperor should be so pleased with Huo Qu Bing winning the Qi Lian Mountains and kicking the crap out of the Xiong Nu that he will likely not severely reprimand General Gong Xun. Huo Qu Bing has a slight smile but said nothing, only waving them off.

He sat there quietly, not sure what he was thinking about. He didn't move for quite some time, so I shook his elbow "What are you thinking about? You earned quite an accomplishment, wondering what the Emperor will bestow upon you?" He smiled and whoosh he had me pined underneath him "I only want the Emperor to bestow marriage. To you."

I was embarrassed and flustered and grabbed his hand which was venturing inside my robe "Didn't you said, before we got married, we wouldn't...." He smiled and kissed me on the lips "I said we wouldn't do that, but I didn't say we wouldn't kiss, we wouldn't hug, we wouldn't touch." I pushed him "There are people outside the carriage! Stop being so crazy." He let out a long sigh and then leaned on my elbow and hollered outside "Order the army to move faster so that we can set up camp faster." I laughed and chastised him "You're abusing your authority."

He leaned his head and lightly blew in my ear. If I laughed he'll surely get more into it so I controlled myself not to laugh, keeping a straight face "What were you just thinking about?" He didn't answer me, only lighting rubbing my ear lobes "People say that a big ear lobe is a sign of good fortune. You appear to have a lot of good fortune, and marrying me must be your biggest good fortune."

I huffed "Nonsense! People say that a thin lip means unfaithful, which makes me afraid of marrying you." He laughed "You still dare to argue with me?" and then he started nibbling on my ears, his tongue lightly tracing the ridges. My body turned weak and tingly, and his breathing got heavier and he got more into it. I quickly said "I know what you were thinking about earlier. You were thinking that between the Great General Wei and the Emperor, you're stuck between them, so how are you to balance that delicate relationship."

He stopped and caressed my cheek "You sure know how to change the subject." I hesitated and then allowed my heartbeat to settle down "You're not denying it, which means I'm right." He sighed and stretched "Some things can be worried about after returning to Chang An. No reason to rush these things." I was silent and then nodded "Right. Let's not think of these things now. If we want to worry, we can worry after we get back to Chang An."

He sat up straight and rubbed my forehead, staring at me "I don't care what you are worrying about, what you are scared about. All you need to remember is that I will be your husband, no matter what happens I will be there. In happiness or in sadness, we will

face it together. In the future, it will not be you alone facing everything, but us facing things together.”

Our eyes met and my nose started to redden and my throat got all dry. I can’t say a single word, only reaching out my hand and our fingers tightly entwined with each others. From now on, I will no longer be a lone bird flying, with only me and my shadow as a companion. I have him.

.....

The night fires in the army camp burn brightly, and all around are people laughing, crying, or fighting. Huo Qu Bing explains that to survive is a blessing, and they will surely be greatly rewarded when they return to Chang An. Being through a war and going back to greatly changed circumstances takes a while to work through all those complicated emotions.

I discuss how the military manuals I read said that army behavior must be tightly regulated in order to win battles. He lightly coughed and then tried to keep himself from laughing. I got annoyed and wanted to huff off, but he grabbed my hand “Lady wife, please don’t be mad, let your husband carefully explain this to you.” I shake off his hand “Who is your lady wife! If you continue to mock me, I don’t want to be your lady wife.” Huo Qu Bing embraced me and was about to whisper in my ear when I see Chen An Kang heading towards us so I quickly shake him off. Apparently General Li Guang is arriving to give his report.

Huo Qu Bing sees my frown and tells me I can’t hide, but I tell him to go do his official matters and I’ll go wander around. He knows I don’t want to see Li Gan so he let’s me off the hook.

I wander around and see a group of soldiers gathered around a fire tearing into a roasted rabbit. They discuss how to spend their newfound riches, and which dancing house is the best. Some complain that the girls at Luo Yu House are so high and mighty, but no one dares upset them because her highness the Consort is their staunch supporter. I sigh, realizing that Luo Yu House has clearly pissed off people without even realizing it.

As I was deep in thought, I felt someone staring at me. I look up and see Li Gan and Gong Xun Aou walking past following Huo Qu Bing. Li Gan looked at me and then a look of shock passed through his face as he recognized me. He looked at Huo Qu Bing, who just smiled back and then shook his head at me. Gong Xun Aou saw Li Gan looking at me so he also looked at me. When he recognized me, he shot me a look of disbelief, and then shot Huo Qu Bing a look of shock. I turned away and hurried into the tent. The things that will come are already arriving.

“Asleep?” Huo Qu Bing asked as he entered the darkened tent. “Not yet.” He embraced me from behind “Why are you sitting in the dark in a daze?” I was silent and when whispered “General Gong Xun Aou doesn’t seem happy to see me.”

Huo Qu Bing replied “He messed up so badly this time, normally he ought to lose his head, but lots of people in court will surely plead for him. But he will still be cast down as a commoner. Uncle (General Wei) feels greatly indebted to him for saving him from Princess Guantao years ago, so uncle will surely help him build up his accomplishments

and regain his official title. But right now he's clearly not going to be happy. And whether he's happy or not has nothing to do with us. We should be happy for ourselves."

I snuggled in his arms and used my fingers to count "It's just me. But what about you? Your aunt is the Empress, one uncle is the Emperor, another uncle is a General, yet another uncle is the Great General, and your step-father is a high ranking official in court. Plus all their relatives. Even if I use all the fingers on my hands it's not enough to count them."

[Quick primer on the Wei siblings (who are really the Han dynasty equivalents of the Song sisters if you ask me): there are three sisters and one brother. The eldest is Wei Zhi Fu, who married Emperor Wu of Han (Liu Che) and became his Empress, next is Wei Jun Ru who married General Gong Xun Aou, next comes Wei Shao Er (Huo Qu Bing's mother) who married a Han court official surnamed Chen (though she had Huo Qu Bing out of wedlock), and lastly there is youngest brother Wei Qing who married Princess Pingyang (the Emperor's older sister. Whew, these Wei siblings sure can marry well.)]

Huo Qu Bing tightened his arms and I yelped that it hurt, and he angrily chastised me "Why are you over thinking! I can determine my own life. I don't listen to what others say if I don't agree. Also, you have your wolf pack in Xi Yu. I'm afraid you'll run back to Xi Yu if you're unhappy. Who dares to make you even the slightest bit unhappy?"

I turned over and rested my head on his shoulder "I sense that you don't like the politics in Chang An either. Why don't we run away! Travel from the South to the North, from the desert to the plains, we go wherever we want. Isn't that swell?" He was quiet for some time "Looks like Chang An really hurt you. In the past you always charged straight ahead without a care. You fought for anything, you dared to do anything. But now you want to run away, you're even too scared to go back to Chang An."

I felt bad so I forced a smile "I suppose I'm feeling some emotional exhaustion is all. I....."

He covered my mouth "I didn't mean anything by it so you don't need to explain. Just like you said, I'm not all alone. My grandmother and my mother were born of such low status, the Wei women found it hard to even find a man to marry. My mother, my aunt, and my uncle were all born without a father. I am also born out of wedlock. If it wasn't for my aunt (Empress Wei), I will probably carry the brand of being illegitimate and be a servant in the Princess' Estate. Or I might be like my uncle, and if I couldn't stand it anymore, run to my birth father's estate and be his stable hand and be treated worse than a pig or a dog by the lady of that house."

This is the first time Huo Qu Bing has spoken of his background. His usual arrogance is all gone, and my heart aches for him. I tightly hug his waist and he just smiles and shakes his head at me "Without aunt, even with uncle's prowess, he wouldn't have had the opportunity to succeed. And without aunt and uncle, no matter what I wanted to accomplish, there was no way I would lead an army to war at the age of eighteen. These things, Xi Ma Qian and those scholars were right about. Yu Er, my childhood dreams are close but not yet achieved. Also, right now the Crown Prince is only eight years old and needs guidance. Uncle is around but he's in an awkward situation. Since I was a child I've received the benefits from my family, and I cannot just receive and not give back. When I

accomplish what I need to do, I will leave Chang An with you. And with the Emperor's temper...." He softly sighed "In truth, history shows that the only truly wise official was Fan Li (a scholar, general, and politician in the Chu Kingdom). He was born when his country was in need, and he helped reclaim lost territory. After he exerted his great will and vision, he left it all behind and went to travel the country. He managed to create an even more legendary life afterwards. His life was more exciting than a normal person's two lifetimes."

I replied "I understand now. After the Xiong Nu no longer have any ability to attack the Han dynasty, then you will have fulfilled your childhood destiny. Then you will discuss other things." Huo Qu Bing smiled and lowered his head to kiss me on the cheek "I guess this means you have to live the old adage 'marry a dog follow a dog, marry a chicken follow a chicken.'" I coldly huffed at his "If you want to refer to yourself as a dog or a chicken, be my guest! But don't use that comparison on me. I want to happily be my snowy moonlight beauty."

He started laughing loudly and I hurried to shush him "Gong Xun Aou and Li Guang's tents are nearby." He continued to laugh and I glared at him before extinguishing the lamp. I started to make the bed and he smiled "Even though we said we would sleep apart, but I really miss you. We don't do that....let's just make out for a little bit." My face turned red and I admonished him "I don't know what you think about all day?"

Huo Qu Bing chuckled and sidled up next to me, with his nose buried in the crook of my neck and his hand on my chest, murmuring "Food, women, sex....if I don't think about those things that would mean something is wrong with me. If I wasn't so afraid you'd get pregnant, I really can't.....ay...." My body melted in his embrace, and the half made bed became a jumbled mess because of us. He suddenly stopped and buried his head down, with his body all stiff. I can hear him breathing heavily, and only some moments later did his breathing become normal. He raised his head and smiled "We're getting married the moment we reach Chang An. Otherwise all this is going to destroy me."

I lighted rubbed his eyebrows, really hurting for him. The entire Wei family, from the Empress on down to the Great General Wei, are all illegitimate. Huo Qu Bing is also illegitimate. People wouldn't dare insult them to their faces, but they constantly talk about them behind their backs. He acts like he doesn't care, but as a child he surely wondered why his dad didn't marry his mom. Why other people had a dad and he didn't? So now he doesn't want his own child to be subject to the same censure, so he wouldn't have a child before getting married.

He grabbed my finger and lightly kissed it, and then immediately let me go and stood up. He walked some distance away before turning to look back at me "Yu Er, sometimes you are so mesmerizing. Seeing you like this, I finally understand why some kings would rather have the beauty over the empire." I didn't do anything yet he made it seem like I was seducing him. I made a face at him and immediately fixed the blankets and got under the covers, deciding to ignore him.

He looked at me and then smiled "I noticed you didn't eat much during dinner. And we're sleeping late tonight, so you'll probably be hungry in the middle of the night. Shall I ask the chef to bring some roast lamb in?" I shook my head and declined, but then shared with

him what I had heard around the camp. Soldiers were complaining that they didn't have enough to eat. Didn't the Emperor send new provisions for him? If the army rations are running out, why doesn't he share with the army since he can't finish it all and we're almost back to Chang An?

He smiled and fixed my blankets and gave me a history lesson. Some of the most powerful generals of the past did indeed train their soldiers well, so well the soldiers only responded to them and not to the Emperor. But what happened to them? The Emperor killed them after they served their purpose. The Great General Wei treats all his troops well and is beloved by his soldiers, yet look at him now, the Emperor no longer trusts him.

I was silent and then replied "I understand now. Sun Zi was right, but he missed one point. He didn't teach those victorious generals how to keep their own heads after they won the war. In history, there are plenty of victorious generals, but very few that have emerged unscathed afterwards."

He nodded and sat down next to me "The soldiers will surely be hating me for not sharing provisions with them, which I can easily do and earn their affection and praise. But why do I want their praise? The love of the people is something that can only belong to the Emperor. Especially people like me, who wield military power, we are what the rulers must guard against. If I take the Emperor's provisions to win the soldiers' affection, it will only harm me down the road. Some other generals like Li Guang do share their provisions because they are kind, but they can afford to do so because they have won very few battles, so the Emperor will never worry about them. Think about it? If the Emperor hears that the soldiers love me, and with his current concern over my uncle, will I ever get another chance to lead an army?" He sighed "Because of this, even if I can't eat all those carts full of provisions, I can only keep it for myself."

I turned over to pick up the pillow "This whole way home you have been behaving oddly with the weirdest requests. You randomly ask soldiers to build you a football field, or go hunting with you for fun. Leisure and waste of time are perfect words to describe you. I was wondering what had gotten into you! But I thought you won those life and death battles, so whatever made you happy was fine. I didn't realize there was a reason to your madness. Come to think of it, my arrogant and direct behavior in Chang An was truly risky, and I probably skated by with some luck."

Huo Qu Bing took the pillow and put it down. He hesitated for awhile before saying the truth "In the latter part your behavior was pretty low key. But when you first started, your tactics were too blunt and direct. Your biggest luck was having the Shi Enterprises protecting you from the get go. If I didn't guess wrong, the Shi Enterprises must have been secretly getting rid of your obstacles for you. Otherwise, before Li Yan gained power, your dancing house wouldn't have been that smooth and successful. Plenty of businesses in Chang An have powerful backers, and a Princess who did not make her position clear at that time couldn't possibly help you. Afterwards, word got out that you saved me before, which helped temper your earlier actions. The Princess, for my sake, is also willing to let some things slide with you. The reason I was so anxious to tell the Princess about my relationship with you that day was because of my worry that your behavior would upset someone out there and the Princess wouldn't be willing to protect you. Without this, there would no way someone new to Chang An like you would rise so

fast in Chang An.”

I had my back to Huo Qu Bing and was looking for the fragrance ball, but my hand unconsciously clenched into a fist. I quickly released it and with a smile turned back to hang it up. I casually said “So this was what happened! To think I thought I did it all because of my own cleverness.”

He silently looked at me, and my heart was feeling uneven. I peeked at him but he just laughed and told me to get some rest. In the darkness, my eyes are wide open and I stare at the ceiling of the tent. The fragrance balls are hanging from the ceiling and releasing a light scent. When I return to Chang An, I will surely see him again. Does he still enjoy sitting in the bamboo pavilion, watching the pigeons take flight and land?

Huo Qu Bing is sleeping at the other side of the tent, and he asks in a low voice “Are you asleep?” I quickly shut my eyes, and in my nervousness I didn’t answer him. When I realized how oddly I was acting and wanted to respond, I realized that answering now would be even odder. I end up laying there in without saying a word. With sigh that is so soft I can barely hear it, Huo Qu Bing turned over and the tent resumed its normal silence.

.....

I sit on the hillside looking towards the direction of Chang An. Tomorrow we’ll be back in the city. The grass behind me crunched and I turned around to see Li Gan coming up to me. He smiled and made a bow, and I returned it. I asked “General Huo has summoned everyone to play football. You’re not playing?” He walked next to me and laughed “How could I not play? I got kicked by him until I was covered in dust and dirt. If I keep playing, I’ll be incapacitated for the rest of the year. I made an excuse to take a break. How could his leg be that lucky? Everyone on his team has a permanent grin on. They’ve won so much money from the rest of us, we have no money to even buy a drink anymore.”

I stare ahead in silence so he asked “Do you miss Chang An?” I lightly nodded and he quietly said “Not me. I’d rather not go back and prefer to fight a lifetime of wars in the Northwest.” He laughed in a sad way “I know it’s never going to happen, but even my dreams are all her. I’m afraid to say anything, just keeping it in my heart. That one character “Li” appeared to have burrowed itself in my heart. Is it because I can never have her that makes this longing impossible to shake? When I was fighting the Xiong Nu, I thought that death could be an escape, and I actually fell in love with war. In the past it was for family honor and glory, but now I crave that feeling of being at the brink of life and death. Which is when I can forget her.”

I ruefully ask “An entire lifetime without being about to forget someone? Even when you try you can’t forget?” He furrowed his brows “Did I try hard to forget her? Was I trying to forget her, or trying to remember her?” I felt like we each had our own thoughts and was actually talking around each other, so I shook the thoughts from my head and smiled “Before you deployed, did she say anything to you, or mention me?”

He looked dazed and smiled “One day I was in the Palace and happened to run into her. After bowing, she said “the battlefield is danger, please be careful”. I know it was just polite language because she knew I was off to fight the Xiong Nu, but that made me so happy.” I looked at him, thinking that the encounter must’ve have been orchestrated by Li Yan to appear to be a random encounter. I ask again if she mentioned me and Li Gan said

she did not.

Zhao Puo Nu came to get Li Gan “My lord Li, everyone is looking for you! General Huo said that if you’re afraid to keep losing, you can be on his team. He guarantees you’ll win all your money back and then some.” Li Gan coldly huffed “I let him win a few rounds and he thinks I’m really afraid of him! Let’s go! Don’t forget that in the past my reputation at football far exceeded my reputation at archery.”

Li Gan turned to me with a smile “You don’t want to come watch him play? He’s reknown in Chang An for being especially handsome and dashing when playing, totally different than his usual cold silent persona.” I hesitated and then shook my head “You go, everyone is waiting for you!”

On my way back to the tent, I pass by the football field. Huo Qu Bing ordered the regular soldiers not to leave their posts to watch, but there was still quite a lot of spectators gathered around. From far away I can hear the gambling, the fighting, the catcalling. I laughed. If Sun Zi saw this kind of general leading his troops and turning the army base into a gambling den, he’d probably be so pissed he’d crawl out of his grave.

I had planned to circle around, but then remembered what Li Gan said and got curious. I decided to find a quiet spot to watch, not quite sure in what way Huo Qu Bing could be even more handsome and dashing. I found a spot when someone walked up to me “The Great General Wei was a strict leader, what must he think to see this scene?” I sighed, I guess I can’t avoid it. “If General Gong Xun isn’t happy with Huo Qu Bing, then you can tell him directly. It’s no use talking to me about it.”

He smiled until his eyes crinkled together “People say that a wise wife would make a family free of peril. Even though you are just a woman who has no official title to Qu Bing, but you should still....” He wanted to keep lecturing and nagging, but a football whizzed through the air and almost hit the back of his head. He had to kick it back into the field and thus stopped nagging.

Huo Qu Bing, with a gold circlet around his hair, wearing a white robe that is embroidered with a gold dragon, stands right there. He’s tall and broad, with such a magnetic aura, like a warrior god from the Heavens. Seeing him, one who lament and wonder how this Heavenly creature fell from the skies and ended up here on earth. He had a slight smile and was giving Gong Xun Aou a goofy look “General Gong Xun, that was an accidental kick, I do apologize! Since you’re quite good, come down and play a few rounds with us” Gong Xun Aou wanted to decline but already someone was dragging him down.

Huo Qu Bing ran to my side as Gong Xun Aou was changing, whispering in a laughing voice “This round I will be on the same team as Li Gan. I promise we’ll kick Gong Xun Aou six-ways to Sunday, so he no longer has any energy to annoy us anymore.” Li Gan ran over and gave Huo Qu Bing a high five followed by a fist bump, both of them turning to look at Gong Xun Aou with an expression like a wolf spotting a bunny. I used to wonder how these two guys, with such different personalities, could be such good friends. Seeing them like this, I realized they’ve probably pulled these devilish deeds plenty of times before.

Li Gan laughed “Dear younger sister-in-law, thank goodness you came, otherwise Qu Bing this bastard would feel bad making Gong Xun Aou play.” My face turned bright red

and I humped “What nonsense are you talking about?” Li Gan innocently looked at Huo Qu Bing “Did I say something wrong?” Huo Qu Bing laughed and shook his head “Not at all. That was absolutely right.”

I shake my sleeve and move to leave but Huo Qu Bing quickly grabs me. I see the other soldiers are staring at me so I quickly stop and act all serious “Go kick your silly football and stop standing here pushing and pulling.” Huo Qu Bing quickly stepped back. Li Gan pointed at Huo Qu Bing and started guffawing, while Huo Qu Bing just coldly glared at him. Li Gan raised his hands to indicate he was sorry, but he couldn’t stop laughing. Huo Qu Bing sent a flying kick towards him, which Li Gan blocked because he was already anticipating it. He took off laughing.

Gong Xun Aou is done changing and the game begins. Huo Qu Bing turns to give me one last smile before composing himself and running back in the field. This is my first time watching football and I have no clue what the rules are. I don’t know what is good, what is bad, and I could care less who wins. I just stare at Huo Qu Bing.

He’s like the son of the wind. His movements are light and effortless, constantly changing. Sometimes its powerful and smooth like a dragon, other times gentle and airy like a crane. He’s like a priceless sword, one quick movement that no one can block, with a seamless stroke and he has destroyed his opponent yet he is still pristine white.

Under the brilliant sun, he’s so beautiful that it stuns my heart. All around us is the thunderous cheer of the spectators. But everything disappears in my ears. My world is completely silent, and in the silence there is only his form seemingly flying through the wind. In that moment, I know that in my entire life, I will never forget what I have seen today. Even when all my hair turns white and my eyes can no longer see, I will still be able to describe in vivid detail his each and every single movement.

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 2 - Chapter

8

Chapter 24: Brilliant Smile

“I won’t enter the city with you. I’ll go in first.” Huo Qu Bing thought and agreed “Fine. There is bound to be a lot of confusion upon entering the city, and I need to enter the Palace to see the Emperor first. Are you going back to Luo Yu House?” I sighed “Where else can I go? Hong Gu is sure to berate me to death.”

Huo Qu Bing looked amused “You are the one at fault, if you get yelled at you deserve it. But if you want some peace and quiet, you can always go to my estate directly. Housekeeper Chen will take good care of you. From now on, my home is your home. Luo Yu House won’t be the only place you can go in Chang An.”

I shook my head “It’s time to face the music, isn’t that what you said? I can’t avoid it forever, and if Hong Gu knew I was back in Chang An and I didn’t go see her, I would commit an additional grievous infraction.” Huo Qu Bing smiled and nodded “Finally. Here’s the brave Jin Yu I know.”

After half a year away, Chang An appears not to have changed at all. Crowds of people are coming from the city gates towards the road leading to the Palace. They all want to see the man responsible for instilling fear in the Xiong Nu, Huo Qu Bing, as well as the captured Xiong Nu princes and dukes. I am moving against the flow of traffic and I break a sweat. It takes me three times as long to arrive at Luo Yu House.

The door is open a crack and the two doormen are sitting under the shade staying cool. They are drinking tea and chatting. I walk in and they scramble up “Young master, if you want to watch dancing you have to go through the front door. This is for the servants to use.” I laughed and cocked my head “You can’t recognize me?” They stared at me and quickly bowed “We heard Madam was out on a business trip and we apologize for not recognizing you right away.”

The yard is filled with shady trees and I can see the sparkling lake, giving off a cool breeze. Xing Yen is sweeping the courtyard and I go stand next to her. She startled and looked at me, stunned for a moment before starting to scream. I had to plug my ears and I tease her “Stop sweeping and prepare some water for me. I need a bath, it’s so hot today.” She nodded and went off.

Before the water arrived, Hong Gu is storming into my room. One hand is on her waist and another had a finger pointing at me “You ungrateful, heartless, cruel.....” Xing Yen passed me a bowl of cold green bean soup and neither of us dare to speak, only glancing at each other. I listen to Hong Gu berate me and drink my soup “....how can you be so

heartless, leaving us weak ladies all without a by-your-leave, not caring about whether we live or die, not caring about our friendship.....All this time, I've been praying daily and hoping nightly.....”

I finish my soup while Hong Gu keeps yelling at me. After listen some more, I finally can't resist and laugh. Her eyes are red “How can you laugh?” I reply “It's just that you're making me sound like a faithless boyfriend who deserted you.” She thought about it and couldn't help but smile, but then she started crying and I had to comfort her “Hong Gu, this time it's all my fault.”

Hong Gu wiped her tears “Xiao Yu, I'm not angry because you left. There isn't a party in this world that doesn't end. The girls come and go here many cycles already, and there will be a day when you'll leave. I was hoping you can marry someone and live a peaceful life. But you really shouldn't have left without saying anything, just leaving a letter. Not even a face to face farewell. You might be a carefree person but I'm not.”

I walked up and held her hand “I do things based on my own whim, and I didn't consider your feelings. I won't do that again. Please chalk this up to my youthful folly and forgive me this once.”

Hong Gu glared at me and then finally smiled after a few moments. “I heard General Huo returned to the city today. How coincidental you also returned to the city today?” I was like a girl who just had her personal life splashed open like a book. I demurely lower my head and didn't answer her. Hong Gu looked at my countenance and suddenly understood. She tightly grasped my hand and happily asked “You and General Huo....you and him.....is it for real?”

I laugh and pull my hand free, turning around to look for a change of clothes. I still don't answer but Hong Gu claps her hands “Oh yes! Oh yes! I can finally stop worrying. Hurray for running away! Three cheers for leaving! This runaway trip was totally worth it.”

I was behind the panel bathing when Hong Gu stood on the other side to talk to me “..... Xiao Yu, thanks to you running away, I actually got to meet the Big Boss of the Shi Enterprises. I couldn't have imagined it was such a handsome young man. His every word was gentle and refined, and he was so polite to everyone.....”

Bam! The water ladle in my land fell on the floor and Hong Gu quickly asked what happened? I pick up the ladle and continue bathing “Nothing, just accidentally dropped the ladle. What did the Big Boss want with you?”

Hong Gu huffed “Of course it was because of you. He wanted to know all the details of you leaving. Because of what you asked, I burned the letter and didn't mention it. But I was so angry at you then, and I could care less who could find you and bring you back so I could yell at you. So I told the Big Boss that you left a letter for General Huo, which I had already sent to his estate.”

Did he need to ask how I left Chang An? Since he already didn't care, why did he have to constantly do these little things that make him appear to care? I splashed more water over my head, as if I could wash things away. “Hong Gu, tell everyone who saw me to keep quiet about the fact that I've returned.”

Hong Gu happily agreed “Fine! Rest for a few days, but don't forget to enter the Palace to

personally thank Consort Li. When you were gone, she didn't visit personally but would send Master Li to play songs here. This helped deflect a lot of potential problems. She is very loyal. Others would try to shake off their inglorious past, but she is a caring person and knew you were gone and helped take care of us."

I stood there in a daze. In the future.....what to do? Li Yan, I know your pain and your sorrow, which is why I don't want to hurt you. But in the end must I pick a side? I chatted with Hong Gu some more and the time flies. It's nighttime already and she tells me to rest after we finish dinner.

Perhaps it's spending all my time with Huo Qu Bing these past few months, but suddenly I feel a sense of loneliness being by myself. My brain keeps thinking all these random thoughts. Since I couldn't sleep, I snuck out of the house and went to the Huo Estate. The moment I leaped over the wall and landed, a few black dogs have surrounded me. They sniff and confirm that I am welcome so they depart.

Compared to the hustle and bustle on the streets of Chang An during the daytime, the Huo Estate is unusually quiet. Huo Qu Bing's room is completely dark, looks like he's still in the Palace. I lightly open the door and go in. The room has clearly been just cleaned, with fresh incense and grapes on a plate still glistening water drops. I open the window to let in the night breeze, making it much cooler. I arrange a cushion and lean on the window sill, eating grapes and looking at the full moon outside.

The moon has already reached the center and Huo Qu Bing still hasn't returned. I grumbled, he shouldn't be in the Palace until so late, so did he get dragged elsewhere to drink? But with his personality, who can possibly drag him anywhere?

I'm can't hold off my sleepiness and drowsily nod off. Right when I'm blissfully in dream heaven, I hear people talking. I quickly jump up and hide myself. Huo Qu Bing walks in with a maid trailing him. She doesn't even light the lamp before noticing the state of the room and getting down her knees to beg forgiveness, bowing her head on the floor. Huo Qu Bing takes a look at the half eaten grapes and the messy cushions strewn around and he smiles. But his voice is still cold when he tells her that she can leave.

After he's alone, he lays down on the pallet and teases "We're alone, you can come out now." I walk out from behind the panel and he smiles and waves me over to sit next to him. I ask "Why so late?" He just stared at me and didn't answer, his eyes twinkling with mirth. In the beginning I was fine looking him in the eyes, but gradually I feel self conscious and my heart beats faster. I quickly look outside.

He suddenly wrenched me into his embrace and I was caught unawares. "What are you doing?" struggling to get up. He held me and wouldn't let go "Be good and just lay still, let me tell you something. I missed you while I was in the Palace, so I didn't drink much and quickly left. Afterwards I went to Luo Yu House to find you, but your room was dark and you weren't there. At that time, I thought.....I wasn't very happy. So later I went somewhere to sit alone, and there I thought about all sorts of things. That is why I'm home so late. But who knew it was all my own doing." He lightly caressed my hair and murmured in a low voice "I'm too arrogant, believing there is very little I can't handle. I always refuse to admit my own fears and concerns. I ought not be telling you this, but I feel like I owe you for doubting you. I shouldn't have been overthinking these things, so I

didn't want to keep this from you.”

I felt these conflicting emotions. He said that Chang An has hurt me, but he was also hurt here. He didn't tell me exactly what he had been thinking of, so can I accept his apology so candidly? I sniffed his shoulder and then slapped his hand away “What heavy scent of makeup. I wonder who made it? If you like it so much, I should start using this brand as well.”

Huo Qu Bing sat up and quickly explained “It was the dancing girls in the Palace, they got close when they were presenting wine.” I coldly scoffed “Is that right? Didn't you say you went somewhere by yourself for a long time?” He flicked me lightly on the forehead and laughed “Are you jealous right now?” I glared at him but he just pulled me into his embrace again while I tried to push him off “What if I'm jealous? From now on, if you smell like someone else's makeup, I don't want you to appear before me.”

He let me go but his eyes were still twinkling “It doesn't matter, I just like it.” I huffed “You're sick!” He crossed his hands behind his head and laid down “If this is an illness, I hope to be sick everyday.”

I cannot possibly be more shameless than him, so I stop bickering with him. He laughed “Too bad it's already so late, so tomorrow morning I'll take you somewhere.” I stood up “Then I'm going home, you come get me tomorrow. He quickly grabbed my hand “In a few more hours the sun will rise, why go back and forth? Spend the night here and I'll give you some space on the pallet.” I thought about it and nodded my head.

I always thought I didn't need much sleep, but compared to Huo Qu Bing, my energy level is nothing. It's still dark outside and he's already shaking me. I'm feeling lazy so I refuse to get up, pleading “Whatever you want me to see, it can wait until the sun rises, I'm so sleepy, let me sleep awhile longer.” He kept trying to wake me up but I kept trying to burrow deeper into the blanket and covered my head with it so I can't hear him anywhere. He sat for a few moments and then opened the door to shout “Servants, bring the morning wash!”

I quickly sat up and he teased me “You're not scared of me, but you're scared of the maids in my house?” He saw me giving him the stink eye and he quickly closed the door. “You can sleep anytime, but a sunrise is only once a day.”

The entire mountain side is covered in Lover's Vines. Breezy layers with a soft fragrance, the green glistening in the hillside. Gold and silver colors peek out from the fog like it's dancing. In this quiet morning, it's so beautiful it appears right out of a dream, and so fragile it might shatter if you touch it.

The moment the sun hits the mountain top, the fog dissipates and the colors burst into life. The gold flows while the silver dances, turning the entire mountain into a glorious treasure of gold and silver. “This is worth getting up for, right?” Huo Qu Bing asked with a smile. I'm staring at everything in a daze. He holds my hand and we slowly stroll underneath the Lover's Vines. He said in a pleased tone “I knew you'd be stunned into silence. When I saw this last night, I was totally shocked. It was planted only last Fall and who knew it would turn out so beautiful?”

I was coming out of my daze and purposely want to annoy him “What's so special about

this? It's not like you planted it." He didn't get upset and instead very happily said "I knew you would say that, so I saved this for last." He pointed to an entire patch to the North "I planted that entire area. As a replacement for you, it's more than enough."

The Lover's Vines are twinkling and smiling under the bright sunlight, so eye-catching, but nowhere near as brilliant as his smile at this very moment. It's warmth and light seems to sweep away every shadow lurking in the heart.

I suddenly cup my hands around my mouth and holler into the canyon "I'm very happy! Very happy!" Huo Qu Bing startled for a moment and then his entire face was all smiles and he also shouted into the canyon "I'm also very happy!" Our two "very happy, very happy" seemed to reverberate and bounce around the mountain, slowly blending together. He laughed and picked me up, twirling me around the flowers. I can't help myself and start laughing, and our laughter also echoed through the canyons, dancing through an entire mountain of Lover's Vines.

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 2 - Chapter 9

Chapter 25: Emotional Turmoil

I had been kneeling for a hour already and Li Yan still hasn't said a word. I thought to myself that this impasse can't continue, so I bow my head to the floor "Your highness seeks to see me for what matter?"

Li Yan's coldness dissipates and I see a tinge of sadness "Jin Yu, how could this happen? When I was told about it, I couldn't believe it. Wasn't the person you liked Meng Jiu of Shi Enterprises? You promised me. Yet now you are with Huo Qu Bing. Are you planning on marrying him?"

"I'm sorry, I....I....." I could only bow my head "No matter what, I will never reveal your background. It will be like I have never heard of it." Li Yan coldly laughed "What if Huo Qu Bing wants to oppose Buo Er?" I raised my head to look at her "I don't want to call you "Your Highness." Li Yan, I am saying this as your friend. Please give up the plan to put your son on the throne. Your life is already so difficult, how can you endure knowing you are putting your child through the same thing?"

Li Yan stared at me "I ask you this, if one day Huo Qu Bing wanted to hurt us, will you help him?" I replied "If you don't intend to harm the Crown Prince, then Huo Qu Bing will have no reason to harm you. And me....I will not let you hurt Huo Qu Bing."

Li Yan started laughing "Jin Yu, you can leave now. From this day forward, we walk our own paths. But you have to remember your oath. The Heavens have a good memory." She has someone she wants to protect, I have someone I want to protect, and we have finally reached this point. I silently give her a bow and leave.

Hong Gu had the kitchen prepare my favorite dishes but I have no appetite. I ask Hong Gu if she's shuttered the other businesses like I asked, and she says it's in process but can't be hurried. I tell her to inform the girls in the dancing houses to be more low key, and I also plan to quietly find a buyer for the dancing houses as well.

Hong Gu asked "Xiao Yu, what happened? I can't imagined anyone you might be afraid of in Chang An now? General Huo will not let anyone mistreat you, and even Consort Li's presence means others will not dare to harass us." I reply "I've overturned the boat with Consort Li. You know Li Yan's calculating nature. Even with Qu Bing protecting me, if Li Yan gets the tiniest bit of opportunity and she fans the flames, things could get out of control. The way the Emperor dotes on Li Yan, if he chooses to punish us, I might be able to get away, but you all will.....Li Yan is not the same person she was before she entered the Palace. Now she would not blink an eye to see the loss of a few lives."

I remembered hearing the soldiers criticizing Luo Yu House in the army base that day “Hong Gu, Luo Yu House seems to be doing well on the surface, but in truth we have offended quite a lot of people. With the Princess behind us, people have tempered their grievances. But if Li Yan decides to attack us, she will bring forth all those feelings, and it will only impact the girls here. I would love to immediately close down the dancing house, but that would leave all the girls out on the street. If I don’t handle this properly, I won’t be able to make sure they will be alright.”

Hong Gu looked stunned “How could this have happened?” I shook my head and smiled ruefully “A person’s calculations can never beat the Heaven’s machinations. I could have never predicted we’d be in this position today.”

.....

Yi Zhi Xie gets wind that two of his tribal leaders have decided to switch their allegiance to the Han dynasty. He immediately sends someone to talk them out of it, and one tribal leader is swayed and gives up his intention. That causes a dispute with the other tribal leader and a battle breaks out. The tribal leader who wants to go to the Han kills the other leader who decided to stay with the Xiong Nu, and this causes soldiers to switch sides and a bitter civil war to break out.

News reaches the Han army which is still on the road, and Zhao Puo Nu suggests waiting until the Xiong Nu have killed each other before swooping in. Huo Qu Bing rejects this safer course of action. The Han dynasty has always treated those who surrender well. If the tribal leader does want to surrender and the Han dynasty refuses to help him, then it will strike hesitation and worry into the hearts of future opponents considering switching allegiances to the Han. He ignores the objections of the court officials and takes ten thousand men to cross the Yellow River and charge into a Xiong Nu army base with over forty thousand Xiong Nu soldiers.

Huo Qu Bing shows the courage and valor of one against many, once again using fewer soldiers to defeat a larger force. With yet another seemingly impossible victory, Huo Qu Bing cements his reputation within the Xiong Nu as a warrior god who cannot be defeated. So many Xiong Nu fear him that if they even hear his name, they turn and run away. Huo Qu Bing successfully saves the tribal leader, and then orders him to execute his soldiers who defected and turned against him. The flying blood and the rolling heads finally caused all the Xiong Nu to put down their weapons and end this civil war.

Huo Qu Bing sends soldiers to escort the tribal leader and his family members to Chang An while he waits for Liu Che’s orders. He settles the forty thousand surrendered Xiong Nu soldiers first before returning to Chang An. Liu Che rewards the tribal leader and his generals, giving them official titles and wealth in Chang An. The surrendered Xiong Nu forces are placed around the Long Xi region and he builds forts in the Qi Lian Mountains. With that, the Xiong Nu’s presence in the Yellow River and the Desert South regions are completely wiped out, and another path to Xi Yu has been opened up.

Liu Che greatly rewards Huo Qu Bing for his success in this foray. When Huo Qu Bing returns to Chang An, Liu Che personally leaves Chang An to welcome him back right outside the gates of the city. He gives Huo Qu Bing so much wealth that he has now way surpassed the Great General Wei, and becomes the most honored man in court.

It's already Fall but the weather hasn't cooled down. I lay on the pallet, with my eyes closed, fanning myself with a fan decorated with a beautiful woman on it's face. Someone sat down next to me, but I kept my eyes closed and continued to ignore him. He leaned down to kiss me and I blocked him with my fan, so he ended up kissing the beauty on the fan. He stared at me with annoyance and resignation, so I turned over and asked the fan "Is she prettier than me?"

Huo Qu Bing laughed "I don't know if she's prettier, but she sure is more affectionate than you. I haven't seen you in so long and you don't even know how to welcome me back with hugs and kisses." I huffed and used the fan to cover my face, continuing to ignore him.

He leaned in to whisper in my ear "What's wrong with you? How come you're so dispirited?" I dramatically sigh "I'm pretending to be a disgruntled housewife, a pining housewife. Can't you tell?"

"Stop lolling around on the pallet, you're becoming lazier. Go out with me." He smiled and took the fan away, tossing it to the side and pulling me up. "You're getting better at making stuff up. I arrive in Chang An and immediately hear from Housekeeper Chen that Luo Yu House apparently is quickly divesting all its businesses. Not sure what you're up to, but you seemed to have pinned it on me."

Since returning to Chang An, because of my worries, other than going to the Palace to see Li Yan, I stay home and rarely venture out on the streets. But since Huo Qu Bing is so eager and I don't want to dampen his mood, I force myself up and leave the house with him.

We sit at a window table in Yi Ping Ju, with a pot of tea and some snacks, casually conversing. He laughs to discuss the origin of the "wine spring" and how it got that name. When the Emperor rewarded wine, there was too many people there and not enough to go around. So Huo Qu Bing poured the wine into the spring so everyone can partake of the Emperor's wine, so the spring got the name "wine spring." The entire area also got coined that name, and the original Xiong Nu name got tossed aside.

I laugh "So the spring actually tasted like wine?" He sipped his tea and said "The Emperor's wine can't possibly be ordinary. If everyone said they tasted wine, then the spring must've been scented with wine."

He reached over to wipe some crumbs from my mouth, but since there were other customers in the restaurant, I was embarrassed and ducked my head and wiped it myself. He didn't touch my face, but instead reached for my hand. I tried pulling it out of his grasp but he wouldn't let go, so I just pouted and let him be. Huo Qu Bing smiled, his eyes as gentle as water, when suddenly his entire demeanor seemed to shift.

He still smiled, but his smile turned rather brittle. I curiously follow the direction of his gaze, and it was like getting smacked by a large object on my heart. I felt a current of pain pass through and my mind blanks as I'm rooted to the spot.

Jiu Ye, with his face ashen, is staring at my entwined hands with Huo Qu Bing's. His expression reveals his disbelief. I'm so shocked that my first instinct is to retract my hand, but Huo Qu Bing tightly grips it and refuses to let go. It's like a steel vise pressing into my

flesh, and the pain makes my heart jerk but clears my head. I quietly let Huo Qu Bing hold my hand, sitting there without moving.

Shi Feng looked at Jiu Ye and then looked at me “Big sister Yu, you.....when did you return to Chang An? Did you know Jiu Ye..... Hearing the rumors that you had returned to Chang An, none of us could believe that you are with.....”

Jiu Ye, with a soft voice, decisively cut off Xiao Feng’s sentence “It’s good knowing you are fine.” His face had a fleeting smile, but it’s clear that his heart is filled with untold anguish. I casually replied “I’m sorry to cause you worry.” Huo Qu Bing smiled “Brother Meng, why don’t you join us and have some tea?” Jiu Ye wanted to decline but Tian Cao quickly agreed.

Shi Feng looked upset and gave me multiple angry glares, and a few huffy looks at Huo Qu Bing. Jiu Ye, his face still white, appeared to have regained his composure. With a smile he toasted Huo Qu Bing and casually chatted about random things. But the moment his gaze brushed over me, he would immediately avoid me, not looking me once in the eyes.

I kept my head lowered staring at the bamboo floor underneath the table. Huo Qu Bing continued to hold my hand, and all I felt was waves of icy yet burning sensation in my heart. I said to Huo Qu Bing “Let’s go home!” He looked at me, his eyes full of pain and pity, let go of my hand and lightly nodded his head.

“Jin Yu, what a coincidence! I was planning to visit you in the next few days.” Li Guang Li and a few of his rich playboy friends sauntered into the restaurant. He greeted me before noticing Huo Qu Bing. The other guys immediately stopped their goofy grins and quickly greeted Huo Qu Bing. Only Li Guang Li looked like he didn’t care, and even looked somewhat boastful and arrogant. He made a fist greeting to Huo Qu Bing “General Huo, what a surprise.” Huo Qu Bing ignored him without even a look, and appeared not to have heard him at all.

I laughed “I was just heading home. Come by the House if you need to see me about anything!” Li Guang Li kept giving me these laughing looks, getting me all confused. “What’s going on?” He bit his lip and looked a little bit embarrassed “Nothing, you’ll know in a few days.”

Huo Qu Bing shot Li Guang Li a freezing look, causing Li Guang Li to immediately turn away. But Li Guang Li suddenly got his courage up and turned back to looked at Huo Qu Bing, who had already moved on. Huo Qu Bing pined his eyes on me, indicting that we should leave now. Li Guang Li couldn’t get an upper hand, so he turned to look at me, displaying a pleased look.

Li Guang Li is someone who can’t keep a secret, and right now he’s actually exceedingly odd. Because of Li Yan, I can’t ignore this, so I try to goad him “Second brother Li is usually so forthright in how you handle yourself. Why are you suddenly all missish today? You’re acting more shy than a virgin bride about to get married.”

The other playboys started to laugh and quickly stopped themselves, but Li Guang Li’s face turned bright red and he hollered “It’s not that I don’t want to say it, just that my sister asked me earlier not to.” My heart was flip-flopping so I laugh “If her highness

asked you not to, you obviously are afraid to, then I won't press you further" and I made a move to leave.

"Who says I don't dare?" Li Guang Li walked up to me, hesitated for a moment and looked elsewhere, afraid to meet my eyes "Sister said that she asked the Emperor to bestow marriage for me....to you."

Jiu Ye, who had seemingly been casually drinking tea and not paying attention to the earlier conversation, suddenly dropped his cup and it shattered on the ground. He turned to stare at Li Guang Li. Huo Qu Bing appeared to have heard the funniest joke in the entire world, startling for a moment before bursting into laughter.

Li Guang Li looked shaken and quickly avoided Jiu Ye's stare. When he saw Huo Qu Bing's reaction, he appeared torn. Shi Feng yelled out "You're a toad wanting to eat swan's meat!" (i.e. he's coveting something he doesn't deserve).

Everything happened so fast I was rooted to the spot thinking of what to do. With Shi Feng's yelling, it shook me out of my thoughts and I chided him "Xiao Feng, apologize immediately." I have never spoken so harshly to Xiao Feng before, and he gave me a hurt look.

Jiu Ye smiled and calmly said "Apologies are only necessary when one did something wrong. Xiao Feng did nothing wrong, why apologize?" Huo Qu Bing nodded and coldly added "My sentiments exactly."

I can't believe the two of them are actually agreeing right now. I don't want to escalate things so I turn and bow apologetically to Li Guang Li, who was red with embarrassment and glaring at Jiu Ye and Huo Qu Bing. He stormed off and I turned back to stomp my foot at Huo Qu Bing "Li Guang Li is a softie inside, if we ask nicely he won't agree to this. Now you've made him want to do it because of his pride."

Huo Qu Bing looked dismissive and coldly huffed "Ask him nicely? If you weren't here, I would have ripped his head off on the spot." I give a resigned sigh but Huo Qu Bing was already dragging me out of there "Let's go see the Emperor right now to clear this up. Consort Li....good one.....umph!"

In the rush, I was afraid to look back, but I know that a pair of eyes are trained on my back. I was distracted so I trip on a small door ledge and Huo Qu Bing immediately supports me. He turned back and met Jiu Ye's eyes, one cold and one warm, neither of them moving to avoid each other's pointed stares. It felt like sparks were going off around me, so I quickly squeezed out a smile and grabbed Huo Qu Bing's elbow and we left Yi Ping Ju.

We had barely stepped foot in the Palace and didn't even see the Emperor when a middle-aged Palace lady stopped us and bowed to Huo Qu Bing. He was anxious to see the Emperor, but calmed down when he saw her "This is the Palace maid who serves the Empress. When I was small I called her Auntie Yun, but she refuses to let me call her that anymore. You can call her that for me from now on!" I quickly bow "Auntie Yun."

Auntie Yun smiled "Yu Er? Last time General Huo spoke with the Empress at length about you. I've been looking forward to meeting you."

Huo Qu Bing's expression got colder again while Auntie Yun grabbed my hand "Come greet the Empress first, she's also been wanting to meet you."

In a bamboo pavilion, with the crysanthemums blooming white and yellow scenting the entire garden, a gentle breeze blows through the garden. We slow down our steps and Auntie Yun calls out "Your highness." Empress Wei waits until we bow to her and then points to some seats, telling us to sit down.

Empress Wei sat across from me and studied me carefully. She sighed "Being with Qu Bing, it must be hard on you." Huo Qu Bing spoke up "I won't let it be hard on her."

Empress Wei had a small smile "The Emperor did not agree to marry her to Li Guang Li."

Huo Qu Bing smiled "I'll go thank the Emperor in a bit then. I didn't get a chance to ask the Emperor for this marriage, but he knows how I feel about Jin Yu. Years ago he even teased me, saying that if I couldn't win her by myself, he'll go steal her for me."

Empress Wei had a pitying look in her eyes "The Emperor is going to decide your marriage, but.....but it's not with Jin Yu." Huo Qu Bing jumped up "Other than Jin Yu, I do not want anyone else." Empress Wei continued "The Emperor will agree to let you make Jin Yu your concubine, but she cannot be your wife."

It's almost dusk and a pair of swallows are circling above, their shadows sprayed on the table. I lower my head and count the bamboo strips on the table top, one, two, five....how many did I count to? I start over again, one, three, two.....

Huo Qu Bing was about to drag me out of there, but Empress Wei softly said "Qu Bing, this is more complicated than the battlefield. You can't just swing your sword and kill your way out of here. Aren't you afraid that you'll do something that ends up harming Jin Yu."

Huo Qu Bing stopped and sat back down "What does the Emperor intend?" Empress Wei explained "Why does the Emperor place you in such high favor? These recent deployments, he's given you the military power, and every time you emerge victorious he rewards you greatly. Within two years, your position is almost pressing up against your uncle."

Huo Qu Bing was quiet and didn't respond. Liu Che has been wary of Wei Qing's almost unfettered military power, and has been looking for the chance to divert Wei Qing's armed forces. But not anyone can match up to Wei Qing, and the appearance of Huo Qu Bing has given him the perfectly opportunity to finally do so. Even better, Huo Qu Bing and Wei Qing's personalities are diametrically opposite from each other, and Liu Che actually gets along better with Huo Qu Bing. So Liu Che is purposely diverting Wei Qing's power to Huo Qu Bing and splitting the military into two factions, which will also further drive a wedge between Wei Qing and Huo Qu Bing.

Empress Wei waved her hand and swept from petals from the table "The Emperor wants to marry a princess to you."

Years ago, Liu Che needed Wei Qing to help him battle the forces of the Bao family and the Wang family. But after those families were defeated, Wei Qing's power and esteem continued to grow in court, things naturally shifted to account for that. Why did Wei Qing marry a princess many years older than him? The real reason no one can be certain. So

many years have passed, and now it is Huo Qu Bing who is being asked once again to marry a princess.

The sun was setting, a giant red circle in the sky, shining over the three of us silently sitting there.

Huo Qu Bing raised his head and looked at the wild geese in the sky “Because of Uncle’s precedent, I’ve been as cautious as possible. Yet....” He turned and gave me a warm smile “Other than you, I’m not marrying anyone else, princess or no princess.” Empress Wei raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

Huo Qu Bing bowed to the Empress and then took my hand and led me out. Empress Wei sighed softly, saying nothing and lowering her head down to her zither, strumming it. The sound of the zither rose and fell like the wind, a sorrow permeating the entire yard.

Looking out, a waning sun illuminates a few falling petals floating in the wind.

.....

The solitary moonlight in this dark night, a few fireflies glowing, the leaves slowly falling without a sound. My heart is as somber as this night, how can a few fireflies illuminate my future? I stand still for quite some time before suddenly getting up to chase the fireflies. My sleeves fluttering in the wind, the moment I capture a light, I immediately release it.

“Yu Er....” the voice is soft and gentle, as if he’s afraid of startling this night scene. My heart shook and I immediately stopping moving, but I can’t turn my head around.

What is he doing here? I used to hope day and night for this moment, to one day hear his voice in this courtyard. But too much time has passed, my pain has lessened and I’ve since given up on this hope. Yet this voice spoke up now right behind me. “What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Yu Er, I.....I’m sorry.” Jiu Ye, using his crutch, walked up to me. “I.....I want to ask you to forgive me. Can you give me another chance?” My entire heart was thrown for a loop and I stare incredulously at him. “What did you say? I don’t understand what you just said.”

He entire face is filled with sorrow but his eyes are burning with intensity that scalds me until my heart hurts “My mistake was thinking I knew what was best, and never telling you what was really inside my heart. I made the decision on what was best for both of us, but I never asked you whether my decision was correct? And was it what you wanted? Yu Er, I do like you, you have always been in my heart.”

This is just so ludicrous. These words that I once would have exchanged my life to hear, but today, it only fills me with anger and sadness. I can’t help it and start laughing out loud “Jiu Ye, stop teasing me. I’ve already agreed to marry Huo Qu Bing.”

He gripped his crutch tightly and his face was white, but his words are unwavering “You haven’t married him yet. And right now he’s holding so much military power, and with his complicated family situation, his marriage isn’t just any ordinary marriage anymore. It will be decided based on political gain and risk, and it’s not something he can singlehandedly decide. Yu Er, it was all my fault before, but this time I don’t want to miss another chance.”

I stand there in a daze. How could this be happening? In the past I prayed and prayed and it never came true, so how did it all change now?

Jiu Ye's hand reached over to brush a leaf off my forehead and his face lightly brushed my cheek. I bluntly turn my face to avoid his hand so he quickly withdrew it.

My initial shock has worn off a bit and I've regained some clarity, so I take a step back and harden my heart to say "Jiu Ye, I've.....Qu Bing and I.....I'm already his."

He was stunned for a moment, with all these conflicted emotions, before smiling without a care "Did you forget my grandfather's story? My grandmother was someone else's concubine before marrying my grandfather. Do you think I will care about this?"

I'm so shocked that I keep shaking my head and murmuring "Then why? Why did you do what you did in the past....."

Jiu Ye took two steps towards me and stared at me "Yu Er, initially I was worried about my family situation. Since grandfather established the Shi Enterprises, most of our earnings are spent helping the people of Xi Yu or helping those kingdoms strengthen their military might to guard against Han expansion. When the business fell into my hands, I've tried to distance myself from Xi Yu but there are still so many connections there. If this information was ever to leak out, my head rolling on the floor would be the quickest punishment that can happen. I knew I should have kept my distance from you, but I couldn't help myself and did try to test whether you could accept me like this."

I bit my lip "And I didn't pass your test?" He shook his head "You passed. Way beyond my expectations." I was confused so I looked at him "You are simply too wonderful, causing me to feel like I wasn't good enough for you, and could never give you the happiness you deserve. So I arrogantly drew an emotional line to keep you outside."

How in the world can there be an explanation like this? I coldly laugh and he quickly grabs my hand. I shake him off and pain flashed through his eyes. He lowered his head to say "Yu Er, my physical handicap, it's not just my leg. I also.....I also cannot have kids. I cannot give you a normal family."

He smiled bitterly "It's not that I can't consummate a marriage, it's just that my offspring will inherit my physical condition which is hard to survive into adulthood. My mother gave birth to five kids, and I'm the only one who survived to adulthood. Four out of the five kids had a physical handicap. My parents died early partly because they couldn't deal with the emotional pain of losing their children. After I studied medicine, I investigated my mother's side of the family and discovered that she was the only child of my grandmother's who survived. My grandmother also died early because she couldn't deal with the loss. I've grown up under this spectre of my parents sorrow. Watching my mother happily get pregnant each time and then watching her painfully losing a child each time. I don't want this to repeat itself."

So he kept rejecting me over and over because of this? Why did he think I was like other women out there who need to have children? Does one need children to be happy? Why didn't he ask me what I wanted?

I was filled with a hundred different emotions, my heart hurting so much. He actually laughed at himself, so I reached out and started hitting him. My hands landed on his

shoulder, his chest “Why.....why didn’t you tell me this earlier? Would I care about these things? All I cared about was you!”

He stood there without moving, allowing me to hit him over and over again. My heart was in so much pain that I felt the strength in my arms slowly seep away. My body shakes and I have no more energy to hit him. I loosen my fisted hands while my tears start to fall uncontrollably.

He quickly wiped away my tears. “Yu Er, from now on I will never let you cry again. Since you left, I’ve been trying to make arrangements for all the businesses in the Shi Enterprises. Once I settle everything, let’s buy a few horses and leave Chang An. We’ll travel fast and disappear completely. From the Northern desert to the Southern valleys, we’ll go wherever you want to go. There will be dangers ahead, but I know that together we can weather any obstacle.”

My tears continue to rain down, no amount of wiping is enough to stop it. In minutes, Jiu Ye’s robe is completely soaked through at the shoulder. Since leaving the Palace this evening, my heart has been as heavy as a lead ball. Right now I don’t know why I’m crying, all I know is that my heart hurts, it hurts so much, so much.

A hand brusquely jerked me aside, but it was so powerful that my entire body flew backwards. Before I can even make a sound, I’ve already fallen into a familiar embrace. Huo Qu Bing’s entire body is rigid and his arm is so tight around me that I’m almost unable to breath. He didn’t look at me once, only giving Jiu Ye a smile “Yu Er’s tears, from now on I will wipe it away for her. There is no need to burden you.”

Jiu Ye and Huo Qu Bing stared at each other for some time, and then they both turned to look at me. I closed my eyes, too scared to look at either of them. My tears continued to fall and my body continues to shake.

Huo Qu Bing said “Excuse us” and then picked me up in his arms and turned around to leave. His footsteps are rapid, and behind us Jiu Ye spoke up “Yu Er, this time it’s my turn to win your heart.” Huo Qu Bing stopped for a brief moment before continuing to walk away at an even faster pace.

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 2 - Chapter

10

Chapter 26: Angry Kiss

A twenty year old Huo Qu Bing is the shiniest star in Chang An. The vibe around him is as if following him will mean untold riches and an unlimited future, ready to be made a Duke or a General. Huo Qu Bing remains brash and arrogant in the way he behaves, his aura so bright it hurts the eyes. Admiration, dislike, hatred, jealousy, toadies, there remains an entire assortment of feelings about him amongst the people in court. But regardless of whether one is a minister or a royal, there is not a single person who dares to directly oppose Huo Qu Bing's intensity.

In comparison, Wei Qing becomes even more low key. In his tens of years commanding his forces, he has built up a long standing loyalty with his subordinates stemming from surviving battles together. His grace and valor is remains present, leaving him as sturdy as a mountain that the Emperor still cannot touch.

I hold a bamboo ledger, appearing to read it, but my mind is nowhere near it. That day, when Huo Qu Bing found me crying on Jiu Ye's shoulder, I thought he would get mad at me. Instead, after we returned home, he just held me in the dark, not saying a single word or making a single movement. He was like a statue. After a long time, he gently placed me on the pallet and laid down next to me. I was afraid of his silence so as I was about to say something, he put his hand on my mouth "I don't want to hear anything. Just get some sleep." In his voice I could hear the faint anxiety and fear.

After that, he acted like nothing happened, treating me the same as always. But every night, if he didn't come to my house, then he had someone pick me up to go to his estate. Because he has to attend court every day, and often the Emperor keeps him around afterwards, he oftentimes comes home drunk. I find myself usually staying at his place.

"Yu Er...." Huo Qu Bing called out. I had no idea when he actually entered the room, and I quickly put down the bamboo ledger "What's going on?" He sat down next to me "There is a banquet tonight in the Palace, I....." I asked "Planning to get drunk again?" He looked at me apologetically and I said "You can't keep getting drunk so that Emperor has no chance to talk to you." I handed him a summons and he opened it, turning his eyes icy cold "You've been summoned into the Palace."

It's a cool day, like its been washed clean by water, and the few clouds add a sense of liveliness. The female attendees at this banquet are strolling, their laughter mixed with their fragrance permeates the air. I'm leaning against a tree with my head raised looking at the sky. I suddenly sense someone staring at me. I turn and see a tall handsome man

wearing a very rich attire staring me straight in the eyes. His face shows his disbelief and shock. I look at him and smile, and his shock disappears to be replaced with joy and unshed tears.

In a few moments, he's composed himself again. He subtly walks around a few times, taking one more look at me before walking away.

Li Yan came out of nowhere and smiled at me "Ms. Jin appears to find admirers wherever you go. One Great General of the Han dynasty is devoted to you, and now a new addition to the court Sir Guang Lu appears to be quite taken with you. Jin Ri Chan arrived in Chang An only a short while ago. Because General Huo handled the defection of the Xiong Nu, the rumor is that he's close friends with General Huo now."

I felt a shock thinking about how she, of all people, happened to notice what just happened. I smiled and looked at a far away Li Gan "Your highness has been in the Palace for much too long if you're only noticing romantic possibilities around you. Please don't project your feelings onto someone else." Li Yan glanced at Li Gan and with a cold smile "Ms. Jin appears to have lost weight lately?" and I reply "Your highness looks rather wan lately."

Li Yan wants to marry me to Li Guang Li which means she fears me. More importantly, she wants to use this seemingly minor matter to test the Emperor's intentions in this potential battle with the Wei family. Too bad for her, the Emperor may adore her, but he still refused to do as she asked. He did not favor the Li family over the Wei family. Instead, he chose to try and control Huo Qu Bing for his own benefit.

Empress Wei walked up to us "What are you talking about? What's so amusing?"

Li Yan quickly bowed while Empress Wei helped her up "I've heard you haven't been feeling well lately. In the future please spare these courtesies. When you have time, read some medical wellness books, and try not to think too much about taxing matters. If you can let it go, just let it go."

Li Yan smiled "Whatever big sister says, little sister I will follow your advice. Compared to big sister, I suppose I am too narrow-minded." Li Yan snuck a peek at me "Little sister I am very pressed with big sister's vast kindness, to be able to let go of things in the past."

Empress Wei smiled softly and asked Auntie Yun "Jin Yu is not familiar with the Palace, please take care of her." She took Li Yan's hand and they walked away together "A few of the other sisters are curious about a new hairstyle you created, all asking me to get you to teach them."

Auntie Yun gently smoothed my hair "You and Qu Bing have both lost weight." I softly called her name, my heart fill with an ache that I can't express.

Auntie Yun continued "Since following the Empress into the Palace, over the years I've seen so much sadness. I'm older now, and my heart is colder. I want to urge you both to take a step back. A man cannot help but have three or four wives. As long as he loves you, that is all that matters. Putting Qu Bing's personality aside, I can't believe you're also so stubborn. The Emperor is not saying you can't marry Qu Bing. And with a princess as the first wife, as a concubine that does not lessen your status. Any other woman out there would have happily accepted this arrangement. Initially I was wondering why you can't be

more understanding. In such a complicated environment, why can't you take a step back and must now cause everyone headache. Ay!" Auntie Yun sighed "Hearing Qu Bing talking about you, you seem like such a vibrant person. But seeing you like this today, I suddenly feel like it's not important anymore. I feel like you two are living the romantic girlish dreams of the youngsters. "To have one person's heart, to never be apart until the hair is white." But how many women in this world actually experience this? Even the famed love stories of the past, the man ended up cheating on the woman and finding a new love."

From the moment Huo Qu Bing entered the Palace, he was surrounded by all the young military officials and placed on a worshiping pedestal. My status is like dirt to his shiniest star so there is no way we could be seated together. When he sees Auntie Yun is by my side, his demeanor seems to relax.

We are separated by the torches and the crowds of revelers. People are talking and dining, the gold and the silver flashing. But all of this seems to disappears from our eyes. In this moment, I feel like we're intimately close to each other. I feel like everything he's thinking, I can understand it all. Yet we are physically apart from each other, so far apart that I feel like no matter how I reach my hand out I can never touch his hand.

Liu Che smiled at Huo Qu Bing "Your majesty I have ordered an estate built for you, the best in Chang An. It will start construction soon. And with a new home, all it needs is a lady of the house....."

I lower my head and play with the wine cup in my hand. This is a long time coming and to be expected, it cannot be avoided. I've reminded myself numerous times, but for some reason my hand still shakes uncontrollably. The wine splashes out of the cup and lands on my new skirt. The little drops, the wet scars, it looks like a departing person's tears.

Perhaps tomorrow will be the day I leave Chang An. Here in the wealth and power of the exalted and the royalty, within this largest and most luxurious city, where people from everywhere mingle, this place is not able to find space for my happiness.....

Perhaps it is like Li Yan once said. I belong to Xi Yu, I belong to the desert. There might not be well-tended peonies in ponds there, but there are never ending blue skies and a sea of verdant grass.

My mind tried to think about all the wonders of the desert, but the blood in my body continues to chill. It becomes so cold that no matter how I try to contain myself, I cannot help but shiver. The wine in my cup, drop by drop, drop by drop, it continues to fall.

All the eyes at the banquet train with envy on Huo Qu Bing, but he looks aloof and with a barely concealed look of pain. Liu Che smiled and looked toward the side of the banquet where all the princesses were sitting, and right as he was about to say something, Huo Qu Bing suddenly stood up and walked to face Liu Che. He kneeled down and bowed his head on the ground and said in a resounding and certain voice "Your servant I thank your majesty for the generous grace. But your servant I have already decided. For every day the Xiong Nu is not eradicated, I shall never have a family. I cannot accept this estate!"

Huo Qu Bing's words are tantamount to him making an oath that he is never getting married in his entire life. In a split second, the entire banquet falls silent, and the sound of

a pin drop could be heard. Everyone looked confused, wondering why the normally brash accepting Huo Qu Bing would decline something as minor as an estate when he's gotten much more rewards from Liu Che and he's accepted it all. For someone raised in luxury like Huo Qu Bing, why would starting a family have any relation to eradicating the Xiong Nu?

I raise my head and stare in shock at Huo Qu Bing, my heart quivering with a sliver of happiness, but hurting more from the pain. Slowly that little bit of happiness also turned to sorrow and heartache. The cup in my hand shatters, but my heart hurts so much that I actually don't feel the pain in my hand. I just feel my palm is hot, and I sense the drops of blood slowly dropping on my skirt. Thank goodness I wore a red outfit today, so it's not going to be visible in the darkness.

Li Yan looked flabbergasted and shaken, while Empress Wei merely raised an eyebrow and continued smiling. Only Liu Che barely blinked an eyelash, keeping his original cool and smiling at Huo Qu Bing "The old saying is that a man needs to have a family first then a career. You've already defeated the Xiong Nu many times, and your name is world reknowned. As for eradicating the Xiong Nu, I merely want to push them out of the desert South region and force them to stay in the desert North. I did not seek to eradicate them, only keeping them from being able to attack the Han territories."

Huo Qu Bing stared at Liu CHe, his demeanor chilly and somber "Your servant I have already made up my mind on this."

Liu Che stared at Huo Qu Bing, his eyes as sharp as knives, his imperial aura radiating from the throne. Everyone looking at this scene is already lowering their heads but Huo Qu Bing remains with his head held high staring Liu Che in the eyes. The silence seems to make this face-off even more pressure filled until the air is thick with tension, but suddenly Liu Che starts laughing "Fine! Whatever you want. I will keep the estate for you until you eradicate the Xiong Nu, and then I will bestow it on you then."

I lightly released my pent up breath. Liu Che backed down on this and Huo Qu Bing claimed a victory. But at what price? My heart hurt and my eyes are heavy with unshed tears. I hold the tears back, I cannot let them use my behavior to see through what Huo Qu Bing just did. I raise my head to look at the sky where there is a lone crescent moon and a few twinkling stars. My tears slowly stop coming, my heart was like a crane lightly flying away. In a second I'm a thousand miles away, flying back to the desert where we once rode side-by-side. That day there were people pursuing us with arrows, but we were free.....

A soft sigh came from Auntie Yun "Qu Bing said it and he did it. If it's not you, then he's not marrying anyone." After the banquet ended, Auntie Yun walked me to the front gates. Huo Qu Bing was already waiting for me beside the carriage. We stare at each other from across the sea of people moving about. My heart churned and my tears bubbled forth. This moment, this second, it was like another lifetime. Auntie Yun said nothing and just quietly departed.

I pack away all my myriad emotions, skipping forward and waving at him. My face has a brilliant smile and I quickly run towards him. I could care less if there are people around us and I leap into his embrace. I wrap my arms around his waist and softly whisper "The

Palace food didn't taste very good so I'm still hungry. Let's hurry home and have the chef make me something yummy to eat."

Huo Qu Bing tightly embraced me and smiled. Before his expression was dark and solemn, but in a split second he turned back into the sunshine boy I knew "Let's go straight home then."

The ministers around us, some looked away because they didn't want to cause trouble, but some of the more arrogant ministers stared at us with looks of disgust. Someone whispered loudly "In public? What shameful behavior!" Only Jin Ri Chan remained expressionless, but in his eyes was laughter and warmth. Huo Qu Bing directed his coldest look at the person who said that. The person initially shrank from Huo Qu Bing's stare, but then puffed up his chest as if taunting him.

I held Huo Qu Bing's hand and laughingly touched his nose, saying in a loud voice "So where could that crazy dog have come from? Running around randomly biting people. If someone was bitten by a crazy hound, it's not like we can bite back. I guess we have to let the dog be a dog and do his crazy howling. I guess we can find amusement in that." I purposely made a gesture like I was listening for something. That person wanted to say something but couldn't without admitting he was the "dog" that I just referred to. He just bit his tongue and glared at me.

Huo Qu Bing laughed and tapped my forehead. He helped me on the carriage and I lifted the curtain to peek outside. I quickly dropped the curtain and he asked "Jin Ri Chan recognized you?" I nodded "He was very careful and discreet. He looked at me and then walked away." Huo Qu Bing pulled me down to rest on his shoulder "Seeing how he cares about you, I ought to take him out to drink."

He suddenly noticed the blood droplets on my skirt and his face changed color. He immediately pulled the hand I was keeping hidden in my sleeve out "You.....what is this...." His voice was stuck in his throat and he couldn't finish his sentence.

I smiled, wanting to explain but finding no good explanation. Even if I had an excuse he wouldn't believe me. So I just stared at him with a smile, indicating he doesn't have to fret. Huo Qu Bing silently stared at me, his eyes filled with hurt and self-blame. His finger lightly traced my smile and he lowered his head to kiss my palm. His lips traced the wound lightly, over and over again.

Qu Bing, the way you treat me, I do not feel the slightest bit of grievance.

.....

"Yu Er, a lady is here to see you." Hong Gu looked nervous, causing me to wonder who it was. She explained the person was a Madam Chen. I startled for a moment before realizing who it was. I've been staying at Huo Qu Bing's Estate for the past few days and today is the first day I'm back in Luo Yu House. And immediately Wei Shao Er is here to see me. Looks like she's been keeping track of my whereabouts, and is looking to keep this from Huo Qu Bing.

I walk to the mirror and look at myself, asking Hong Gu "Please invite Madam Chen inside! It's not convenient to talk outside."

Hong Gu didn't leave but gave me another look "Xiao Yu, I've heard about what happened in the Palace. General Huo refusing the estate given to him by the Emperor, and vowing to eradicate the Xiong Nu before starting a family. We were all in awe of his patriotism, but there is no way the Xiong Nu can be easily eradicated. So if the Xiong Nu remains for one day, he's not willing to marry and have kids? The Great General Wei has three sons already, and he's had two wives, one of them a Princess. But the Great General Wei still goes on the battlefield to fight the wars."

I didn't get to answer her before seeing a stressed middle aged woman walking into the courtyard. She smiled to see me "You must be Jin Yu? Hong Gu didn't come out for quite some time and I was worried you wouldn't see me, so I was presumptuous and walked inside." I hurry over to welcome her and apologize for making her wait. Hong Gu and Xing Yen politely greeted her and then left.

Wei Shao Er looked around my yard and her smile disappeared "I don't want to beat around the bush. If there is anything I say that makes you uncomfortable, I apologize in advance." I smile and nod, knowing my place in Chang An as but an orphan with limited connections, so might as well appear to be magnanimous.

"Gong Xun Aou told me that you don't know your place and is just a hussy. Qu Bing's bad behavior in the army base, you don't try to stop him, and instead let him be. I heard this and felt terrible. I wasn't expecting Qu Bing to marry a well-educated and virtuous woman, but at least she would behave appropriately. Right now the people in court are criticizing Qu Bing, and as a mother it hurts me to know this. I asked the Empress for her thoughts, and she surprisingly took your side. She requested that none of us pressure you. To know my sister likes you is something else, so likely you're not as bad as Gong Xun Aou described. The way I see it, I just want to talk to you as a mother today." Wei Shao Er talked and took notice of my demeanor.

I bowed "Madam please continue, Jin Yu is willing to listen."

Her face showed a sliver of sadness "Qu Bing's birthright you must have heard already. Since I did it, I'm not afraid of own up to it. I had him out of wedlock, and shortly after he was born, his father married another woman. In the Princess' Estate, Qu Bing grew up following his uncle around, but he really longed for his own family. So today, you are causing him...." She bitterly shook her head "They say "The worst unfilial act is to not have a descendant", and how many twenty year old young men in Chang An doesn't have a child already? Jin Yu, I'm here today as Qu Bing's mother. Can you please reconsider. If....." She stared at me "If you can leave Qu Bing, I would be eternally grateful."

I stared at the ground in silence for quite some time. If it was someone else, nothing they could say would affect me. But this woman is Qu Bing's mother. Without her, there would be no Qu Bing. Right now his mother is sitting me pleading with me to leave him. My heart is hurting bit by bit, but outwardly I retain my composure.

Wei Shao Er waited for some time but saw that I remained sitting there with my head down "Jin Yu, I was also young once. It's not that I don't understand you kids, but people need to learn to adapt to reality....."

The door opened with a resounding slam and Huo Qu Bing strode into the courtyard. He took notice of me and Wei Shao Er before bowing to greet his mother "How did mother

come to be here today?” Wei Shao Er looked at me with a hint of disgust “I’ve never met Jin Yu before, so I came to see her.” Huo Qu Bing replied “If mother wanted to meet Yu Er, all you need to do is let me know and I would have brought her to meet you.”

Before Wei Shao Er could respond, I quickly jumped in “Madam was just discussing the latest Chang An fashions with me, which you couldn’t possibly be interested in.” Huo Qu Bing looked at me and then at his mom, before nodding “You ladies do have your private chats. I’ve been out too long and must return now.” Huo Qu Bing followed behind Wei Shao Er “I need to escort mother back to her estate first.”

Even though it’s Winter already, the sun remains bright and the light blankets the entire courtyard. But when I see their departing backs, all I feel is a sense of chill. “Yu Er, what’s wrong? Why are you all ashen?” Hong Gu supported me and asked. I shook my head “Did you send someone to let Qu Bing know?” She sighed “Madam Chen suddenly showing up here, and I know whatever she wanted you would just suffer in silence because of General Huo. I’m afraid you’ll be hurt, so I sent someone to get him.”

I force a laugh “Madam Chen is a weak lone woman, what could possibly happen to me? If this happens again, don’t let Qu Bing know, I can handle it.” Wei Shao Er must think I was trying to stall her because I was waiting for Qu Bing to arrive, so now she must dislike me even more. Hong Gu hesitated and then nodded her head. She escorted me into the room and poured me some tea “Yu Er, did you hear? The Shi Enterprises have split up.” I don’t even drink my tea “What?”

Hong Gu explained “In the last few days, the Shi Enterprises have suddenly split. The businesses have been split amongst the four Feng, Yu, Lei, Dian (Wind, Rain, Lightning and Thunder), and there is already discord among them. The prices for precious rocks and herbal medicine have been skyrocketing because people are unsure of whether these guys can run the businesses. Lu Feng has things under control because Shi Tian Cao is helping him. Rumor is the Jiu Ye is ill and doesn’t want to run it anymore. Yu Er, shall we find time to visit Jiu Ye in the next few days?”

My heart was roiling. He said he was going to do it, and he actually did it. He really was planning to set aside his long time family enterprise. Then I realized something was missing “What about Shi Sheng Xing and Shi Jing Yen? What are they doing?” Hong Gu shook her head, she didn’t know, other than Jing Yen left Chang An possibly because he was cheated out of his portion, and Sheng Xing followed him because they are as close as real brothers.”

Both Shi brothers have left Chang An, and are likely never coming back. Where could they go? Hong Gu asked me “Should we sell yet?” I hesitated and then said “Sell it to Zhang Dian, having him run the dancing houses leaves me feeling more relief.” Hong Gu nodded and looked around nostalgically “I’ve been here since I was young, so I want to keep this back portion where we live and just sell the front to Zhang Dian. We can just wall up the connecting portions.”

I thought a bit “Fine. Lower the price and Zhang Dian won’t object. I’m also used to living here, and as long as I don’t leave Chang An, I am too lazy to move.” Hong Gu teased “Even when you marry someone, you’ll still live here?” And then she realized what she said and immediately looked apologetic “Yu Er.....” I shook my head “Hong Gu, I’m

not such a sensitive person.”

Hong Gu hesitated and then sighed “In the past, I prayed for you to marry high. So I hoped that you would reciprocate General Huo’s feelings, but you were always hot and cold with him. I hoped you would have a change of heart and can marry him someday. But look at things now.....I suddenly think that you following him will bring about only suffering. His branch is simply too high. Up there, the wind is cold and brisk, and there are predators lurking underneath. If you can marry a normal person, and live a simple life, it will be better than what you have now.”

I grabbed Hong Gu’s hand “Having a big sister like you, always worrying about me, I’m already more blessed than most of the girls here. I’m not that weak, the cold and brisk wind won’t do anything to me.” Hong Gu patted my hand “Since you left, the Shi Enterprises have been very good to Luo Yu House. What’s happening now is causing quite a stir outside. Are you going to check on them? If so, please give my best to Jiu Ye.” I turn my head and softly murmur “I’ll take care of this, big sister you needn’t worry.”

.....

The first snow of this Winter season didn’t come down hard, with small and large flakes trickling down intermittently. But it lasted for quite some time, snowing for four straight days. The rooftops and the tree tops are stacked high with snow, and the melted snow on the ground is quickly covered with fresh powder, slowly turning into ice. Often you see a pedestrian slip on the ice and land on the ground.

“Big sister Yu, are you going or not?” asked the former Shi Feng, and now called Lu Feng. I softly answered “Why so impatient still? I don’t know how you manage to run a business.” Lu Feng laughed coldly “I’m not like this when I’m doing business. Because you’re my older sister, that’s why I’m like this. But seeing as you are singlemindedly determined to become Madam Huo, likely you don’t care for a younger brother like me nowadays. It’s my grandpa that wants to see you, so if you refuse to make the trip, I’ll have to let him know and have him come see you. But I’m not sure if you’ll be willing to see him, so just tell me now so I can let him know.”

I looked at the falling snow outside the window for some time and then said “You can go back first, I’ll be by the Shi Estate shortly.”

To make an elderly person happy and more cheerful, I wore a red outer robe to make myself more energetic. The carriage rumbles over the street and crunches over the ice on the ground, the sound hitting my ears steadily. How many times did I take this road before? Sometimes with joy, other times with anticipation, and even with sadness and despair. But today is the first time it feels torturous.

Other than Xiao Feng still living in the Shi Estate, everyone else has moved out. The Shi Estate was always on the quiet side, but now it’s even more lonely. Everywhere there is only solitary white. I’m holding a red umbrella and wearing a red outer robe, walking in the snow. I laugh to think of how eye catching I must look right now, a bright red spot within the white Winter wonderland.

Past the front living room and next to the lake, my eyes sudden see a sea of green foliage growing there that wasn’t there before. When did they plant something there? I take a

closer look and my hurt aches, in a second my eyes fill with tears and I can't see clearly anymore. In what feels like ages ago, someone told me that the Gold Silver Flowers were also called Enduring Winter, because the leaves remained green even during the Winter. He refused to say their other name that day, and refused to view the flowers with me. So this patch of Lover's Vines growing next to the lake, who did he plant them for?

The entire world descends into silence, so silent that I can hear a snowflake landing on my umbrella. I stand in front of the Lover's Vine for some time, the memories of the past have faded, but my tears fall nonetheless on the leaves of the vines. After some time, I stare ahead and force a smile on my face before turning and walking away.

Someone wearing a green robe is sitting on the ice of the lake ice fishing. The snowflakes slowly fall and the view is obscured, but based on what he's wearing, it looks like Tian Cao. I hold my umbrella and slowly walk on the ice surface, being careful because it's so slippery. It's a short distance but it takes me a good while to traverse it.

On the lake someone has drilled a hole that is the size of a bucket. A fishing pole is placed on a rack while the fisherman has his hands tucked inside his robe. He has a jug of wine next to him, and he sits there very relaxed and casual. I softly call out "Third brother Shi, the soft snow, the solitary fisherman on an icy lake, what an enjoyable experience!"

He heard my voice and turned around, and immediately my smile froze. I stand in place, unable to move forward and unable to retreat. Jiu Ye smiled warmly at me, like he didn't have a care in the world. He softly called out "Just waiting for the fish to bite. You walk over slowly so you don't scare them." I think for a moment before I slowly walk to stand next to him. I ask in a low voice "I'm off to see grandpa. Thank you....for letting Xiao Dian take over the dancing houses. If you don't want to run the dancing houses, then you can do whatever you want. But if it's because of me, then you needn't have."

He appeared not to hear what I said, only pointing to a small stool next to him "Sit!" I stood there unmoving so Jiu Ye looked up at me "Why are you wearing so little? I was just planning on heading back, let's go together!" He slowly pulled up the fishing rod and reached over to pick up the crutch that was stuck in the snow. He just picked up the crutch and stood up when the crutch slid on the snow. He was about to fall on the ice and I quickly reached forward to support him.

My one hand was holding the umbrella and I didn't balance myself correctly in the haste, so my feet were also like it had been coated in oil. The two of us were slipping and barely able to support each other from both falling on the ice. Jiu Ye appeared not to care about himself and was only staring at me. He suddenly smiled and tossed his crutch aside, grabbing my arms and pulling me into his embrace. With his sudden gesture, I was so shocked that I wasn't able to cry out before we had both fallen on the ice. My umbrella also flew out and went sliding away on the ice.

Our bodies are pressed together and our faces are inches apart. This is the closest Jiu Ye and I have ever gotten to each other. My body was alternating between boiling hot and freezing cold. The snowflakes landed on my face and he reached over to brush it off. I turn my face to avoid him but he didn't seem to care and caressed my cheeks. I can't avoid him so I cry out "Jiu Ye, what you are doing? It's impossible between us now, I....."

He put his finger on my lips and shushed me. He smiled and shook his head "Yu Er, there

is nothing that is impossible. I will not let you go this time. Huo Qu Bing is good to you, I will be even better to you. Huo Qu Bing can't marry you, but I can. Huo Qu Bing can't take you away from Chang An, but I can. What he can give you, I can also give you. What he can't give you, I can still give you. So Yu Er, you should marry me....." He was half smiling but it couldn't hid his anguish. His eyes remain steadfast "Next Summer, the Lover's Vines next to the lake will bloom. This time we will definitely view the flowers together."

He finished talking and lifted his finger from my lips, but the moment it was raised, he lowered it again and lightly brushed over my lips. His caress was filled with longing and regret, and his dark eyes turned passionate as he lowered his head to kiss me. I tried to avoid his kiss at the same time I tried to push him away. But my hands had no strength so the two of us became entangled in the snow. His lips would graze over my cheek or my forehead as we continued to roll around on the ice.

I suddenly heard the loud and unmistakeable sound of the ice beneath us cracking. In a split second, the little ice fishing hole began to crack swiftly. I was so startled and realized the ice could not sustain the weight of both of us. In my haste all I could think of was that nothing must happen to Jiu Ye, and I've forgotten everything else. I bite down hard on his neck and taste his blood in my mouth. He made a pained noise and his grip on my arms weakened. I used all my might to push him off me away from the cracking ice, which sent me flying backwards into the hole in the lake. My body hit the icy water immediately.

I try my best to swim but the cracked ice is so slippery I cannot grab on. In the bone chilling cold of the ice water, in moments my arms and legs no longer work. There is an undercurrent in the lake that quickly pulls me away from the hole and I look up and see only a layer of ice above my head. I know my chances of survival are none. I can vaguely hear Jiu Ye's anguished cry, and in my quickly blackening out mind all I can see is the smiling face of Huo Qu Bing. I quietly apologized to him. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Maybe the princess will be a wonderful woman.

In the beginning my chest hurt from the lack of oxygen, but after some time, I began to lose consciousness and even my body stops feeling cold or pain. I feel like I'm so light I could fly away. Suddenly I'm grabbed tightly by the arm of someone holding me. Lips are pressed against mine to feed me oxygen and that wakes me up. Immediately my body hurts so badly and I force my eyes open. Jiu Ye's dark eyes are staring at me with warmth even though his face is ice white with cold. One of his arms is entwined on a fishing line and he's desperately holding on to it and trying to pull us against the current back to the opening in the lake. The fishing line is fast digging into his arms and the blood is trickling out. I can see the red seeping into the water around us.

His movements become slower and slower and his ashen white face starts turning blue. But the hole in the lake is still very far from us. I use my eyes to tell him not to save me, and I try to push myself away from him. But his unwavering eyes staring at me never change. It communicates one simple message: either we live together, or we die together!

I feel anger and hopelessness. How can you die like this? Everything I just did was for naught? The pain and despair in my heart makes me unable to hold on and I slowly slip away into unconsciousness.

A day and a night's accumulation of snow makes the entire world frosty, but I'm instead so hot I'm sweating. My mouth is so parched it hurts, causing me so much discomfort I wake up suddenly. I realize then that I'm under heavy blankets and there is a hot burning pit of coal in the room that is roasting me.

I sit up but my body feels stiff and hard to move. I try my best but can barely move my arm. Huo Qu Bing, who had his head down on the pallet napping, woke up and looked at me with unfettered joy "You're awake!"

I had thought that I would never see him again, so seeing him smiling at me, my heart was filled with both anguish and happiness. I croaked out "So hot, so thirsty" and he quickly got up and poured me a cup of water. He eased me into his embrace and slowly helped me drink the water "The doctor said you are suffering from moderate frost bite and the cold has seeped deep into your body. You need to rest for a few days, but thankfully you're quite hearty to begin with so a bout of fever and you've warmed up again. If it was any other woman, you'd likely be dead or at least suffering permanent damage."

His voice sounded scratchy and I can see his ravaged face, making my eyes redden "How many days have I been sick? Have you been here the entire time? I will get better eventually, but why didn't you get any rest?" He gently caressed my face "Three days and two nights. How can I possibly fall asleep? It was only this morning that your fever broke, and that was when I finally let out a sigh of relief." I was worried about Jiu Ye but afraid to ask how he was doing, so I murmured "I....how was I rescued?"

How can I possibly ever conceal anything from Qu Bing, and he clearly knows what I'm getting at. He was silent for a moment and then casually said "Meng Jiu secured the fishing rod on a tree branch and then followed the fishing line into the water to retrieve you. The servants of the Shi Estate showed up just in time and saved you both. Meng Jiu was wearing a fox vest that protected him from the cold, plus he entered the water later than you, so even though his arm is injured and he lost quite a lot of blood, but he's recovered nicely these past few days. He ought to be arriving shortly to check on you."

I suddenly realized that this was my old room in the Bamboo Residence "I....why are we here?" Huo Qu Bing lightly smiled "Meng Jiu said you couldn't be moved because you were so chilled, and the best royal physician I summoned from the Palace also said the same thing. I had no choice but to keep you here until you recovered. Yu Er, how did you lose your footing and fall into an ice hole?" I didn't know how to answer so all I could say was "I'm sorry, I promise to be more careful in the future."

He tightly hugged me "Yu Er, promise me that this can never happen again. Never." One look at his haggard face and his cracking scratchy voice and my hurt just swells with anguish so that all I can do is nod vigorously.

The door is gently opened and Xiao Feng wheels Jiu Ye inside. He takes a look at Huo Qu Bing and quietly leaves. Jiu Ye's arm is securely wrapped in a sling and his face is white as he stares at Huo Qu Bing "I need to listen to her heartbeat."

Huo Qu Bing shifted slightly to give him space, but he still kept me resting against his chest. Jiu Ye looked at Huo Qu Bing as if he was about to say something, so I quickly

spoke up “Can you see when I’ll get better. I can’t move my body and it’s so hot, I’m terribly uncomfortable.”

A quick flash of pain passed through Jiu Ye’s face and he nodded. Huo Qu Bing had a slight smile as he pulled out my arm from under the blanket. Jiu Ye listened to my heartbeat and then checked out my countenance.

I suddenly felt Huo Qu Bing’s body stiffen behind me. I turn to give him a questioning look and I see that his eyes are staring directly at Jiu Ye’s neck. Right there is a clear and visible set of teeth marks. He turns to look at me with disbelief and doubt. My heart was beating so fast I was afraid to look him in the eye so I quickly turn away.

Huo Qu Bing’s entire body is rigid and I can feel the coldness emanating from him. I was originally burning up but quickly I feel cold again. Jiu Ye looks confused and tries to reach out his hand to touch my forehead but Huo Qu Bing immediately brushes his hand aside and asks coldly “When can we leave?”

I give Jiu Ye a pleading look and he notices how distressed I look. His eyes show his concern for me, so after hesitating for a moment “Her chill is almost all gone. If you find a carriage and pack it full of blankets, you can take Yu Er home.”

The moment Huo Qu Bing carries me into the carriage, he bites me hard on my neck. He draws blood and I bite my lips from crying out. I endure this pain on my neck, and the even more painful hurt in my heart. He raised his head to stare at me, his lips red with my blood, his eyes burning with anger. He just stares at me, as if seeking from me a denial, an explanation, a promise. The tears come to my eyes but I cannot say a single word. I see all these emotions in his eyes: pain, rage, despair. He lowered his head and roughly kissed me, the taste of the blood seeping through from the touch of our lips and tongues, a potent acrid sweetness in the rage.

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 2 - Chapter

11

Chapter 27: An Argument

Because I was convalescing, Huo Qu Bing rarely went back to his own estate so that he could spend as much time with me as possible. He's here almost daily, and we both go out of our way to avoid discussing certain things. All we do is try to make the other person happy, and to hide any unhappiness. It's as if his only purpose right now is to make sure I get better, and we've both purposely forgotten the reason I got sick in the first place. At least, we try to pretend we've forgotten.

I've laid on a pallet for nearly half a month now and the new year is upon us before I can get up and move around. I look at myself in the mirror and notice that my face has expanded by an entire size. I put my hand under my chin and press on my cheeks. Yup, chubby. "Looks like I won't be able to fit into the new outfit I had made just for the new year." Xing Yen was sneering off to the side "How could you NOT gain weight? It's like General Huo has been daily feeding a...." I glared at her and made a slashing gesture on my neck to indicate she better shut up. I don't care if they laugh about me behind my back, but she better not dare say that word in front of me now.

"It's not I who said it, it's Hong Gu who said it. General Huo is no longer a general these days, he's become a pig farmer. All day long he asks "What has Yu Er eaten today?" "How much has she eaten?" "She needs more nutritious foods."" Xing Yen stuck her tongue out at me and skipped out of the room. Too bad she ran into an arriving Huo Qu Bing, causing her face to lose all color. Immediately she kneeled on the ground and bowed her head. I was planning to get her back for what she just said, but now I just clap and laugh at her "You totally got your just desserts!"

Huo Qu Bing glanced over Xing Yen and smiled at me "Guess who I brought to see you?" I thought for a moment and my heart leaped "Ri Chan?" Huo Qu Bing nodded and opened the curtain behind him "Welcome honored guest! Someone didn't even blink when she saw me, but the moment she heard it was you, her two eyes lit up."

I shot a look at Huo Qu Bing and told a kneeling Xing Yen "Tell the kitchen to make a few dishes and....ask Hong Gu if there is any wine from the Xi Yu region and bring some here." Ri Chan is wearing a white fox fur cloak and he slowly walked inside. My heart swelled leaving me unable to find a single word to say. All I can do is stare at him and dumbly smile. Memories from my childhood come flooding back: passionate and impetuous Yu Dan, mischievous and difficult Mu Da Duo, and a wise-beyond-his-years Ri Chan.

Ri Chan also silently stared at me, finally smiling and nodding his head “Your being alive makes me so happy.” I also smile and nod my head “Seeing you again also makes me so happy.” A million words we want to say, and all we can say is a simple “happy”.

Huo Qu Bing leaned on the pallet “Are you guys planning to just stand there and talk all day?” Ri Chan smiled and took off his cloak and placed it next to Huo Qu Bing’s black ermine cloak, then joining him on the pallet. I help Xing Yen place the food on the table and then Huo Qu Bing pulls me down to sit next to him. His hand remains on my waist, but since Ri Chan is here, I’m embarrassed and try to shake him off. Ri Chan shook his head and smiled “This is the first time I’ve ever seen her blush. Looks like General Huo isn’t just capable at fighting wars, you also managed to tame this difficult girl.”

Huo Qu Bing actually had an uncharacteristically modest expression and just lowered his head and drank his cup of wine. I place a cup in front of Ri Chan and pour him some wine “The moment we reunite and you’re already saying mean things about me. Your punishment is to drink.” Ri Chan doesn’t decline and picks up his cup and downing the wine. He softly said “I’m sorry” and I shook my head “No need to say that. There was nothing you could have done back then.”

Ri Chan smiled but it was a forlorn smile. He poured himself another cup “Do you know that Mu Da Duo has married Yi Zhi Xie?” I play with the empty cup in my hand “I’ve seen them, and I accidentally shot an arrow into Mu Da Duo.”

Ri Chan was stunned and then he understood “No wonder! So that was what happened! Rumor was that she got injured when she was in pursuit of General Huo, but I didn’t know you were the one to injure her. Yi Zhi Xie, because of you.....” Ri Chan shot a look at Huo Qu Bing “.....and Yu Dan, he was especially caring towards Mu Da Duo and me. Especially towards Mu Da Duo, he was coddling and protective. Mu Da Duo didn’t understand back then and just worshipped Yi Zhi Xie. But once she realized what was the reason, I can tell she was in a lot of pain. But after being injured this time, Yi Zhi Xie treats her a bit differently than before. So you have seen them already....”

Mu Da Duo didn’t die, so that means she and I no longer owe each other anything. Our childhood friendship can now end and we will never have any further relationship with each other. I no longer care about their lives at all. I cut off Ri Chan “Why does Yi Zhi Xie want to kill your father and the other tribal chief?” Ri Chan hesitated for a moment “Since you’ve seen him, don’t you think he’s changed?”

I replied “He....he appears to have less patience than before. In the past he was ruthless, but now he’s added a vicious streak. He’s also completely distrusting of people. That day, when his guards lied, none of us suspected, but he immediately could tell. It’s clear that he’s likely never trusted those people to begin with, and he is now unwilling to forgive people for any transgression.”

Ri Chan nodded “Since he amassed an army and proclaimed himself the Shan Yu, the most important change to his personality is that he no longer trusts anyone. He’s always worried that someone around him will do what he did. A prolonged period of distrust has caused all of us around him to wonder not if this would happen again, but when.” Ri Chan sighed “As his subordinates, the worst feeling is following a ruler who is constantly suspecting you. Yi Zhi Xie has great hopes and plans for the Xiong Nu, but because of his

deeply rooted suspicions, all the tribal chiefs live in fear and are afraid to act.”

Huo Qu Bing laughed “Suspicion is the foundation of being a ruler, and a good ruler simply puts his suspicion within the confines of a reasonable boundary. Using the tactics of a ruler to control those around him, some rulers go overboard, but I find Yi Zhi Xie is still within the boundaries of reason. The Han has a saying called “not a proper name, not a correct saying” and Yi Zhi Xie suffers from this (for usurping the throne). Right now the awkward relationship between Yi Zhi Xiu and his tribal chiefs are partly to blame on the behavior of the tribal chiefs. If Yu Dan had ascended the throne, they would have naturally submitted to him. But the way Yi Zhi Xie came to power, they are all holding a watch and see attitude towards him. If Yi Zhi Xie is a good ruler, then they will think it was meant to be. If not, then they will all wonder what if Yu Dan had taken over. All these thoughts are clearly visible to Yi Zhi Xie, so how could he not be frustrated with his subordinates?”

Ri Chan drank and sighed “It’s hard to believe that the person who understands our Shan Yu today is not a Xiong Nu person, but it’s instead the Great General Huo. If the Shan Yu heard what you just said, he would have wanted to drink with you because you are his kindred spirit.” Ri Chan continued “On the scholarly side there is Dong Fang Xu, Shi Ma Xiang Ru, Shi Ma Qian and company. On the military side there is the Great General Wei and the Great General Huo. Plus an Emperor with great vision and foresight. A Han dynasty that will conquer far and wide is dawning.....” Ri Chan toasted Huo Qu Bing “You are one of the builders of this great Han dynasty, and you and I....” Ri Chan toasted me “.....are lucky enough to have a front row seat to watch this sure to be thrilling and epic writing of history before our eyes.”

It’s hard to find a friend to drink with, and even with Huo Qu Bing and Ri Chan’s high tolerance levels, they still drink enough to get tipsy. Ri Chan prepares to leave and I give him his fox fur cloak. Walking him out the door, even though I said I wasn’t cold, Huo Qu Bing draped his black ermine cloak over me.

Ri Chan was wobbling as he walked out the door, slapping Huo Qu Bing on the shoulder “I’ll place Yu Jin in your hands now. She’s suffered quite a lot already. You....you have to treat her well.” Huo Qu Bing was also slightly unsteady on his feet but his smile was wide as he replied “No problem. You needn’t worry, I promise to take good care of her.” I humph at them “Do you guys notice me standing here? Can’t believe you’re talking as if I’m not right here.” They continue to ignore me and drape their arms around each other’s shoulder, laughing and chatting like the best of friends.

At the front door, a carriage passes by and I notice the wolf brand on the back of the horse. It looks familiar but I can’t remember where I’ve seen it before? Ri Chan said in surprise “I can’t believe the wolf brand can be seen in Chang An?” I quizzically ask him “You’ve seen it before? I also think it looks familiar.” Ri Chan explained “It belongs to a very mysterious group in Xi Yu with a history going back seventy or eighty years. Rumor has it that it was the largest desert thief organization in all of Xi Yu. But others say it’s not, since people have seen the wolf brand protect Han travelers against other desert thieves. No one can say who they really are, but where the wolf brand shows up, everyone in Xi Yu knows to avoid them. It’s clear they are very powerful in Xi Yu.”

I make an “ah” sound of comprehension and then suddenly remember where I’ve seen the

wolf brand before. That day when I went to eat in Long Xi with Li Cheng, I saw the wolf brand and the waiter said that the two men were looking for a young girl. That day I thought it looked familiar so I make a mental note of it.....

The cold wind makes Ri Chan even more clumsy as he stumbled onto his carriage. Huo Qu Bing is also wobbling so I stop thinking about this matter and quickly move to hold him still. After Ri Chan's carriage departs, I notice from the corner of my eye Li Guang Li sitting on a horse watching this scene from a distance. Huo Qu Bing currently has his arm around my waist and his head rest on my shoulder. I let out a resigned sigh and turn around to help Huo Qu Bing back inside. I hope Li Guang Li doesn't share this with Li Yan, otherwise who knows what she'll do next.

After I walk in the yard a short distance, I suddenly remember where I've seen the wolf brand. Thieves? Jiu Ye once said that his grandfather was a thief, and now a series of images flashes through my mind. I remember where I first saw the wolf brand, it was my first meeting with Jiu Ye at the Yue Ya Spring. That day Shi Jing Yen even pointed to the wolf brand and berated me for daring to try to steal from them. That's why I've a recollection of that wolf brand.

Then....that day at the restaurant in Long Xi when they were looking for a young girl.....were they looking for me? Was Jiu Ye already looking for me back then? If he had found me then, what would things be like now? We were once so close to each other, one outside the window, the other inside. But alas, we appeared to have just missed each other.

“Yu Er, I’m so thirsty!” Huo Qu Bing called out and I quickly gathered my thoughts and hurried my steps to help him back inside the room “We’re almost back. What would you like to drink? Some tea, or some fresh fruit juice?”

.....

With so many thoughts swirling around, I ended up not going to the Shi Estate to wish grandpa a happy new year. I only send someone to deliver presents there. Huo Qu Bing has many elders so he left the estate first thing in the morning to go wish everyone a happy new year. I’m bored sitting by myself and remember a few days ago when Huo Qu Bing saw Hong Gu embroidering a pouch. He teasingly asked me if we might just get engaged without anyone’s permission, and I can make him an embroidered pouch as a symbol of our engagement. I’ve never spent time on things like embroidery, but since I’ve nothing to do, I decide to try it out! I think about how happy and surprised he’ll be when he sees the pouch and that makes me so happy inside.

I look for all types of colored thread and go ask Hong Gu for a pattern sheet. Hong Gu looks everywhere before sending me a pattern sheet consisting of a pair of intertwining gold and silver flowers. One gold, one silver, the lines are simple but the design is lively and elegant. Hong Gu sees me staring at the pattern in a daze and teases me “I wanted to find you something else, but nothing else is easy to embroider. This is the easiest and looks so pretty. It’s perfect for someone like you without much experience with embroidery. I worked hard to dig this up, so if you’re not happy I’ve got nothing else. I’ll have to hire someone to embroider something else for you.”

I shook my head “No need, this is fine!” I tie two bamboo rods around the cloth and prepare the needle and thread. Hong Gu shows me how to get started, and once she sees

I'm doing well enough on my own, she leaves to do other things so I can slowly embroider. I sit next to the window with my head bent embroidering. Sometimes I would raise my head and take a break, breathing in the scent of the plum blossoms from the garden wafting inside. It smells lovely, but I can hear some firecrackers popping occasionally as well which initially disrupted my concentration. Eventually I get used to it and focus my attention on the embroidering, barely noticing it anymore.

"What an unusual sight to see Xiao Yu with a needle and thread in her hand." Tian Cao's voice suddenly rings in my ears and I lift my head to see Jiu Ye standing there. In my shock the needle pierces my finger and the pain causes me to snap out of it. I smile and pull the needle out "Jiu Ye and third brother Shi, happy new year!" Jiu Ye looked at the embroidery in my hand and says nothing. Tian Cao looked at Jiu Ye and then at me "Aren't you going to invite us inside? Are we going to talk through the window the whole time?" I hurry to put the embroidery down and welcome them in with a smile.

Tian Cao sits down in front of the table, not even shooting the breeze with me before picking up a tea pot and pouring himself a cup. Jiu Ye wheeled himself next to the window and picked up my embroidery, turning to look at me with his eyes vibrant "Is your finger still bleeding? Let me take a look." He wheeled himself over but I stepped back and hid my finger behind my back. "Just a few drops of blood, it's no big deal."

He smiled and put the embroidery down "I've just been wanting an embroidered pouch. What luck that you've decided to pick up a needle and thread. When you have time why don't you make me one?" I pretend I didn't hear what he said "Would you like some tea?" Jiu Ye replied "No thanks. We're here to see you and we'll be leaving shortly. We also want to pass word from Xiao Feng's grandpa, thanking you for your presents. Please visit him when you have time."

I murmur a soft yes while Jiu Ye continues to smile "If you're reluctant to go to the Shi Estate because of me, I can always stay away." After sending Jiu Ye and Tian Cao away, I'm no longer in the mood to embroider so I just lay on the window sill with my mind blank.

There is some dust on the window corner and I wipe it off. Dust can be wiped away so easily, leaving me to bitterly wonder why my heart couldn't be the same way. I can decide who to keep inside, and who to thoroughly wipe away. Wouldn't that be great! I can control my behavior but my heart isn't so easy to control. When it likes someone, it refuses to listen; and now when it will let me forget, it also won't tell me.

Tian Cao hurried into the yard and I stare behind him "Jiu Ye is not here, and he doesn't know I'm here either." I slowly stand up "What do you want? If you're here to ask me to reconsider, then there is no need."

Tian Cao answered "I'm not here to ask you anything. We all saw what happened between you and Jiu Ye years ago. Whomever you choose today, none of us have any grievances about that. We can only chalk it up to Jiu Ye not having that good fortune. But I just want to tell you something you might not know. Did you know that Jiu Ye started looking for you on the very day you left Chang An?"

My heart was aching "I didn't know before, but I just discovered it a few days ago. I saw the wolf brand. Did Jiu Ye ask them to look for me?" Tian Cao nodded his head "It wasn't

just the wolf brand looking for you, the assassins organizations in Xi Yu, all the desert thieves in the desert, even the Luo Lan and Gui Su kingdoms were all looking for you. But you had thoroughly disappeared.”

I smiled wanly. There was no way anyone could have known that I had been nabbed and taken to the Han dynasty army base to cross-dress and pretend to be a soldier. I never even made it to Xi Yu and instead followed the army to the Xiong Nu. No matter how many people were looking for me in Xi Yu, there was no way I could be found there. It was my letter to Huo Qu Bing that ended up directing Jiu Ye the wrong way.

Tian Cao continued “We followed your every move once you left Chang An, but our trail stopped at the inn in Liang Zhou. We asked around but there were no leads. Because of this, Jiu Ye even made a trip to the Huo Estate to plead with the housekeeper there. Jiu Ye, who has never once begged anyone before, even when the Shi Enterprises were failing Jiu Ye never even went to beg the Emperor, and it turns out that the first person Jiu Ye ever begged in his entire life was a housekeeper at the Huo Estate. I don’t want to recollect the insult we endured that day.”

That day at the Long Xi army base, I finally now realize what the conversation was about across the curtains. I also understand why the soldier’s voice suddenly got so low I couldn’t hear it anymore. Huo Qu Bing must’ve told him to silence himself.

“When General Huo returned to Chang An, Jiu Ye also went to see him personally. General Huo was actually very polite to Jiu Ye, but when asked about your whereabouts, he only replied that he did not know. Jiu Ye is an open person who behaves in a straightforward way. Even with the way things have turned out today, he’s not going to stab anyone in the back. He feels like he owes you so much, and this is the price he has to pay for not being honest with you back then. This is his punishment for not treasuring you when he had the chance. But I don’t care about any of that. I just want you to know the entire truth so that it is fair for both you and for Jiu Ye. General Huo is indeed an extraordinary man. On the battlefield he’s a fearless warrior, and off the battlefield he’s a genuine romantic. He’s truly a real man’s man, an undeniable hero. No matter who you pick, I will be happy for you.”

Tian Cao finished talking and turned around and left, leaving me standing alone in the wind.

It’s long past dinner time and outside is already pitch black. Huo Qu Bing comes home with a face full of fatigue and sees Xing Yen clearing the plates. He asks incredulously “How come dinner is so late?” I don’t answer and Xing Yen bows and quickly says “She didn’t eat at all. However the plates looked when I brought them was how they looked when I cleared them.”

I lightly murmur “Xing Yen, you can leave when you’re done clearing the table.” Xing Yen gave me a look and pouted, but her movements got faster and soon she was done and left the room. Huo Qu Bing smiled and sat down next to me “What’s wrong? Upset that I’m back so late?” He’s smiling but I can see the hidden stress in his eyes. I asked “Did the elders give you a lot of grief?” He replied “You don’t have to worry about these things. I’ll handle it. Now tell me why you didn’t eat dinner?”

I see the stress in his eyes and my heart aches, so I tamp down what I was about to say and

shake my head “No reason. I ate some fried snacks at lunchtime, and with the lack of activity, I’m just not hungry still.” He stood up and took off his outer robe “Then let’s eat later when you’re hungry!” He suddenly saw the half-embroidered pouch in the tray and asked in shock “Did you make that?” He picked it up and looked at it for quite some time, his eyes twinkling with happiness “Is it for me? What...did you prick yourself?”

He walked over to me and picked up my hand to look at my finger but I quickly pulled it back and turned my head “I didn’t embroider it for you, it’s for myself.” He hesitated for a moment and sat down next to me, forcefully turning my head to look at him “What’s going on? Yu Er, if something happened you can start a fight with me, you can berate me, but don’t be upset like this without telling me why. Isn’t a married couple supposed to be honest with each other?”

“Who’s married to you?” I said it so fast that it was out before I realized it, and I saw the look of hurt pass through his eyes. My heart hurt as well and I quickly said “I didn’t mean it like that. I’m....I’m sorry.” He smiled sadly “The person who should be sorry is me. I can’t marry you, and yet I’m keeping you by my side without a proper title.”

I counter “I don’t care about official titles. And since I don’t care about these things, clearly I’m not upset because of this. I just want to ask you....have you always been honest with me?” He smiled confidently “Of course!”

I stare at him in silence and his brow furrows as he thinks about something, causing his expression to turn chilly ” Did you go see Meng Jiu?” He coldly continued “If you are referring to what happened at the inn in Liang Zhou, then I don’t think I did anything wrong. Since he doesn’t like you, why does he keep bothering you? You give him chance after chance, so what right does he have to wait until you’ve left before seeking you out?”

I can’t believe that he doesn’t feel the least bit guilty for what he did. The little bit of hurt I feel for him dissipated and all my anger bubbles forth “Huo Qu Bing, you did this for your own personal reasons. There is the insulting and ridicule, followed by the withholding of information. Your behavior is deplorable!”

I can see the vein throbbing in his forehead and all the hurt in his eyes. He stared at me and suddenly started laughing “Because of him....you” He shook his head and continued to laugh “What am I in your eyes? I did have my own personal reasons. My personal reason was that I didn’t want to see him hurt you again. I just wanted you to forget all the pain of the past and stop being tormented by it all. My personal reason was wanting you to be happy.”

He suddenly stood up and walked out of the room. In seconds his figure has disappeared into the dark night and in that moment, the lamplight in the room appeared to have dimmed significantly. It was clearly his fault, so how did it manage to become my fault? I pick up the embroidery and throw it on the floor. The moment my foot is about to crush the just embroidered gold and silver flower, I hesitate. My body weakens and I lay down on the pallet. My heart is bitter and I wonder to myself – the complicated intertwining vines, so which one of us is grabbing the other person?

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 2 - Chapter

12

Chapter 28: Illness

A few days have passed and still Huo Qu Bing hasn't shown up. Hong Gu, Xing Yen, and none of the maids understand what could have happened. Hong Gu tries to ask me but I refuse to say anything. I feel the mood is getting so tense and soon everyone around me talks less and their voices get lower. Until the end, when the maids see each other, they simply communicate via their eyes. One would shoot a look to the other while the other returns a look. I have no clue what they are communicating and how they are able to understand each other.

I point to Xing Lan and Xing Yen, who are delivering a meal, and ask Hong Gu "Do you have any idea what they are saying to each other?" Hong Gu replied "What's so hard to understand. Xing Lan asked Xing Yen "Did she eat today?" Xing Yen shook her head "Nope." Then Xing Lan followed with "I haven't eaten either, I'm so hungry!" Then Xing Yen snuck a peek at you and nodded to Xing Lan "Later let's get something to eat behind Yu Er's back!" and then the two girls agreed."

I spit out the tea in my mouth, coughing and laughing at the same time "Hong Gu, looks like your visual communications with Xing Yen after you entered the room was also all about whether I've eaten, and making plans to go eat later." Hong Gu calmly sipped her tea "My question was not "Has she eaten today?" but was instead "Has she drank anything today?" I wiped my lips with a handkerchief "You go on talking nonsense!"

Hong Gu lowered her cup "If I don't talk nonsense how can I get you to laugh. These past few days your expression has been just terrible. You're hurting and we are also suffering for you. Yu Er, why are you so hard on yourself? You clearly miss him terribly and are filled with lots of worries. Why don't you go see him?" I lower my head and say nothing when Xing Yen walks in "Ms. Yu Er, Housekeeper Chen from the Huo Estate is here to see you."

Hong Gu quickly invited him him in and walked out "The mediator is here so I can let out a breath of relief. If you two don't make up, you two might be able to withstand it, but none of us can any longer."

Uncle Chen walked in and immediately kneeled before me without even saying a word. I try to duck "Uncle Chen, please talk directly, I can't take such a courtesy from you." He continued to kneel, his face completely bleak, like he hasn't slept all night

"Ms. Yu, that day when the Big Boss of the Shi Enterprises came to see me to ask about you, he made a total of three trips. Each time I kept him out, and I also.....I also was quite

rude to him. Even though young master ordered that we hide the driver of the carriage and conceal all information related to the inn at Liang Zhou, all he did was ask me to keep your whereabouts secret but he never asked me to be rude to Jiu Ye. Young master is arrogant and now he's trying to protect me, so he's not bothering to explain to you. I can't watch the two of you fighting over something I did all on my own, causing a rift between you two."

Mu hurt came forth "Uncle Chen, why did you do that? What's happening right now, is this the happiness you wanted for Qu Bing?" Uncle Chen was silent and only bowed his head to me three times. I continue to try and avoid his courtesy but he managed to bow at least once to me "Please get up! What can I do now since everything has already happened. Even if I rage or ask for punishment, there are no do-overs. Please get up and talk. I'm not used to talking to someone kneeling to me."

Uncle Chen continued to kneel and said nothing. Moments passed and I stared at him quizzically. He suddenly avoided my eyes and appeared to be summoning his courage. It took him a long time to say it "Yesterday the young master was out riding and he suddenly tumbled off his horse. He's been unconscious since then."

His words were so unbelievable that I couldn't comprehend what he just said "What? What did you just say?"

Uncle Chen spoke in such a low voice "The Palace physicians have been by many times but none of them have any solution. Normally they are all proclaiming themselves miracle healers fighting for recognition and respect. But once they face a genuine illness, they start hemming and hawing, trying to pawn it off on each other. The Palace is already in an uproar and the Emperor is in such a rage that he's threatened to kill the entire lot of them. If killing them means the young master will awaken, I don't care if a hundred heads roll. But right now we need them to save a life."

I only understood a few words of what he was saying, but it was like the sky had fallen on me. My shock, fear, regret, and pain all bubbled forth. I pay no heed to what he's saying and my foot is already out the door. Uncle Chen rushed behind me and kept calling me "Ms. Yu, please slow down, I'm not done talking yet." I see the carriage outside belongs to the Huo Estate and I leap inside "Immediately return to the estate" I ordered.

I can hear Uncle Chen calling me "Please wait" and the driver doesn't move. I want to grab the reins and drive the carriage but Uncle Chen calls out to me "Ms. Yu, I'm not done talking. I've heard that the Big Boss of the Shi Enterprises is a talented healer. I was wondering....." I now realize why he didn't start by telling me that Qu Bing was ill, and why he was on his knees and bowing to me. So this was the whole story.

Uncle Chen ran in front of the carriage and was out of breath "Hiring a doctor requires the doctor to be willing to heal the patient. I know Ms. Yu's personality hates that I'm beating around the bush right now, and I am so embarrassed and ashamed about it as well. But if I don't explain everything, I cannot ask you to help. If young master Meng Jiu can heal my young master, if he wanted my head, I'd hand it to him without blinking an eye."

I angrily huff "You underestimate Jiu Ye!" My heart was churning with anxiety to go see Qu Bing immediately, but I have to push that urge down. I tell the driver "Go to the Shi Estate." Uncle Chen said he would return to the estate and wait for us.

Jiu Ye sat there reading a novel and when he raised his head and saw me, his book dropped to the ground. He looked incredulous and his dark eyes were shining with happiness “Yu Er, I’ve waited for so long, and you’ve finally decided to walk back into the Bamboo Residence willingly.” My heart ached and I wouldn’t meet his eyes “I’m here to ask you to heal Qu Bing. He’s been unconscious since yesterday and word is that none of the Palace physicians can heal him.”

The light in his eyes slowly disappear until his eyes are simply dark with disappointment, sadness, and pain. He didn’t ask anything and just said one word “Yes” and then pushed his wheelchair out the door. Uncle Chen was waiting outside the estate and when he saw Jiu Ye, his old face was bright red. He bow low and Jiu Ye graciously asked him to get up. But Uncle Chen’s face was still beet red with shame. Two servants came with a bamboo pallet and Uncle Chen explained that the estate was not made for wheelchair access and this would be faster.

Jiu Ye smiled “Please have them hold the pallet still, I can get on myself. Have the wheelchair brought inside, I’ll need it later.” I see the way Uncle Chen is behaving and I’m angry to think about how poorly he must’ve treated Jiu Ye before to be so polite and courteous now. I sarcastically say “I wonder how he was able to move about the estate in his wheelchair in previous occasions?”

Uncle Chen said nothing and just led the way, while Jiu Ye looked at me and the coldness in his eyes seeped away. He murmured in a low voice “I thought you only cared about him now, and no longer care about how I feel.”

The moment we enter the room, Wei Shao Er has been standing vigil next to the bed and she looks up in alarm. She rushes forward to greet Jiu Ye like a drowning person seeing a branch. Hope mixes with despair in her eyes, whereas I’m the opposite reaction. I don’t even bow to her before I rush to the side of the bed.

He lays there quietly, his lips tightly pressed together and his brows furrowed with worry. It appears he has a lot on his mind. Since I’ve known him, he’s been as bright as the sunshine, always so full of life and energy. This is the first time I’ve seen him like this, so still and seemingly helpless. I use my finger to rub his forehead, my nose starting to redden and before I know it, my face is wet with tears “Qu Bing, Qu Bing.....Yu Er is here! I was wrong. I shouldn’t have engaged in a temper battle with you.”

Jiu Ye pressed his hand on Qu Bing’s wrist but he couldn’t reach a pulse. “Have the servants bring a basin of ice water, I need to clean my hands.” The maid flew out the door and then Jiu Ye wiped his hand on an ice cube and then dried it. He appeared to be calming himself down on the ice before once again placing his hand on Qu Bing’s wrist.

Wei Shao Er and I stare at Jiu Ye without blinking, unconsciously pleading with him to wake Qu Bing up. Jiu Ye closed his eyes and focused all his attention on his finger tips. Everyone in that room held their breaths, it was so quiet we could hear the ice in the basin melting. The more time that passed, the more my fear increased. Why did he need so much time? Jiu Ye’s expression was calm and I couldn’t tell what was happening. Finally Jiu Ye pulled his hand back and I stared at him. My voice was filled with abject fear and pleading anxiety “He’ll be fine, won’t he?”

Ju Ye’s eyes were as calm and impossible to read as ever, and he hesitated before nodding

"He'll be fine. I'll do everything I can to make sure he wakes up." My heart, which had been perched on the tip of a needle, finally returned to its normal spot. He looked at Qu Bing's visage and pressed his ear to Qu Bing's chest to listen for quite some time. He then placed his finger on Qu Bing's wrist once more before asking "What did the Palace physicians say?"

Uncle Chen looked at a row of men standing to the side, and one white haired elderly gentleman stepped forward "All of us cannot diagnose the problem. His heartbeat is weak but it's steady. Usually we can use medicine to shock him awake, but the General's situation is beyond odd. Usually an unconscious person can be forced to drink medicine, but the General refuses to accept the medicine. We cannot force feed him, and acupuncture does not work either. We've flipped through all the books and cannot find a treatment."

Jiu Ye nodded and turned to Wei Shao Er "General Huo is emotionally stressed, which is normally not a big deal. But this has caused all his hidden ailments accumulated from years on the battlefield to arise. Because General Huo is different than a normal person, the split second before he tumbled off the horse, his self-preservation instinct is so strong that it's caused him to shut himself off from any outside attempts to force feed him medicine. Madam, the Palace physicians are right in their diagnoses, and they've tried all the treatments already. I can do no better. But...."

Wei Shao Er was so anxious her voice turned high pitched "But what?" Jiu Ye continued "I can try something different, and it's something I've only been researching and have never actually performed before." Wei Shao Er quickly asked him to explain. "A person has five senses, and taste is but one of them. The sense of touch, the skin is tied to all the major organs. If we can't get the medicine in through his mouth, we can try another entry point. Take off the General's clothes and lock him in an airtight room and use a steam method to boil the medicine and have it enter his body through his skin."

Wei Shao Er looked at the Palace physicians and they all exchanged looks before one spoke up "Steaming the medicine into the body would make the room exceedingly hot. From a medical standpoint, the heat is not good for the patient and might exacerbate the illness. But this method also sounds like it could work. We cannot authorize it and will need Madam to make the decision."

Wei Shao Er glared at them and then looked at Qu Bing with hesitation, unable to make up her mind right away. No one dares make a noise, afraid that if anything were to happen, they would be held responsible. Wei Shao Er looked at her husband for guidance, but since it's not his own son, he is anxious but still unable to step forward and says that he will support whatever she decides to do. I get up and bow to Wei Shao Er "I beg of Madam to please consent, the longer this drags out the worse it'll get."

Wei Shao Er's voice cracked "But what if Qu Bing gets worse?" I reply "If Jiu Ye says he can wake Qu Bing up, then he will wake Qu Bing up." Wei Shao Er still couldn't decide and I got more anxious. But right now I'm considered nobody to Qu Bing, and at this moment I realized how important a proper title can be. Even though he's as important to me as my own life, I cannot speak up at this moment and can only beg and plead with Wei Shao Er.

Jiu Ye's eyes are filled with tender pity and he suddenly turned to bow to Wei Qing "What

does the Great General Wei think?” Wei Qing, normally a man of few words, couldn’t believe Jiu Ye turned to him to speak “Second sister, since things are what it is, we have no other choice. We have to take this risk, so let Mr. Meng perform his treatment! The Emperor is very concerned about Qu Bing’s illness and Mr. Meng would never be anything but careful. He must have thought things through before giving his treatment suggestion.” Wei Shao Er nodded her head, finally agreeing.

It’s no wonder he’s the man even Liu Che is wary of. Wei Qing said little but his every word was like a hidden knife. He made the decision but also placed all the risk on Jiu Ye, completely thorough. Jiu Ye ordered Uncle Chen to prepare everything. When the door to the room closed, I stood outside and just stared without moving. From morning until it was pitch black outside, there was still no movement in that room. After a long time, Jiu Ye asked for ice and it was passed inside to him.

Wei Shao Er was so tense her lips were colorless, and I walked over to her to offer my hand. She hesitated and then grabbed it, our hands are both icy cold. But when we held hands, a warmth slowly seeped through. In that moment, among so many people, we understand each other’s pain.

She gripped my hand more and more tightly and her demeanor appeared to be shaky. She looked at me asking for some assurance, and I looked at her with the conviction that Qu Bing would wake up. She couldn’t sustain herself any longer and put her head on my shoulder. My back was ramrod straight as I stared at that room. Qu Bing, you must be fine, nothing must happen to you!

The door silently opened and Jiu Ye came out with his face white and his lips blue. He grabbed the door weakly and nodded his head. Everyone cried out in happiness and Wei Shao Er rushed inside the room and then she cried “Why is he not awake?” All the Palace physicians ran inside but I turned back to Jiu Ye. I discovered he had passed out in his wheelchair, and one middle-aged physician noticed as well and rushed over to Jiu Ye.

My heart was half ice cold and half burning up. The pain and the guilt was tearing me apart. I was in such a rush to see Qu Bing that I didn’t even notice Jiu Ye had passed out. What must he had felt the moment he fainted?

“Congratulations, Madam. He’s awake. Mr. Meng lit some sleeping incense when he was treating General Huo, so it’ll take a bit of time for him to wake up. But right now he’s just sleeping and no longer unconscious.” Wei Shao Er was so happy her knees buckled and she sank to the ground. I hear that Qu Bing is fine and half of my heart calmed down, but the other half hurt even more. Jiu Ye was slumped in his wheelchair and his hands are so pale I can see the blue veins. I pick up his hands and it feels like ice “What happened to him?”

The middle-aged physician put down Jiu Ye’s other hand “He’s naturally of a weaker constitution than most people, and the steam inside that room was astoundingly hot. A normal person could barely withstand a few hours, plus he had to keep using ice to cool down the General’s body temperature. The hot and cold mixed together, it was already a miracle he could endure it for so long.”

I rub Jiu Ye’s hands and use my mouth to breath warm air to try and heat it up. Uncle Chen bowed to the physician “Will doctor please treat Jiu Ye. When the General awakens

he will surely greatly reward you.” The physician responded “A doctor who risked his life to save another is something I have never seen before. I don’t need you to ask me, I will do my best to treat him.” I tell Uncle Chen “Please prepare the carriage, we need to take Jiu Ye back to the Shi Estate.”

Uncle Chen turned to look at the sleeping Qu Bing “When the General awakens, he will surely be anxious to see you.” I look at the crowd of people surrounding him, like stars around a moon, filled with royal relatives, doctors, and servants alike “I’ll hurry back, but whether I’m here or not makes no difference right now.”

Uncle Chen looked at Jiu Ye’s ashen white face and blue lips and sighed “Ms. Yu, please go with no worries! We will take good care of the young master.” When getting on the carriage, the servants want to help but I wave them off and gingerly carry Jiu Ye on the carriage myself. The physician followed “What splendid martial arts, you barely jostled the patient at all.” I force a smile “Thank you, and what is your surname?” He replied “I am Dr. Zhang, and we’ve actually met before. That day it was General Huo who summoned me to the Shi Estate to treat the young miss.”

I answer “So I’ve already burdened Dr. Zhang before.” He shook his head “With Mr. Meng’s medical skills, I was not needed. But having a chance to listen to him talk medicine is something I ought to thank you for.”

Dr. Zhang personally brewed medicine and helped me feed it to Jiu Ye. He also carefully told me and Tian Cao all the things we need to be aware of before finally departing. When I left here with Jiu Ye, he was perfectly fine, but he came back unconscious. Shi Buo was clearly not happy, but each time he wanted to say something to me, Tian Cao silently asked him not to.

Because I was worried Jiu Ye would need water or anything else, I stayed beside him while he slept fitfully on the pallet. It was like he was worried about things even in his dreams. His eyebrows would twitch and a look of pain would pass across his face.

This is the first time I’ve studied him in such close proximity, and it is also the first time he doesn’t try to conceal anything about himself by using pleasant smiles to hide his real feelings. I rest next to his pillow and start humming a herding song.

Jiu Ye’s furrowed brows start to loosen and his sleep deepens. I hum this ballad over and over and tears come to my eyes. This is a very popular Xiong Nu folk song that talked about a royal lady named Yi Zhu and a slave named Ba Ya Er and their love story. When I was a child, I often heard Yu Dan’s mother the Queen sing this song with a look of sadness and unshed tears. I didn’t understand back then why the song initially had Yi Zhu staring at Ba Ya Er’s back from a far away place, and ended up with Ba Ya Er staring at Yi Zhu’s back from a far away place.

I feel a hand caressing my cheek and I immediately snap out of it, unsure of when I went into a daze. My face was resting on the pallet and at this moment Jiu Ye had turned on his side and his face was directly opposite mine. We can feel each other’s breathing. His fingers were tracing my face, from the eyebrow to the eyes, the nose, the lips, the chin, as if he wanted to commit it to memory and carve it into his heart. His eyes were filled with earth shattering pain, rivers and oceans of regret and longing, of pain and agony.

I'm lured in by his eyes and my mind was shaken. He's always so calm and placid, all the sadness he usually brushes away with a smile. Right now in the depths of his back eyes I can see two little versions of myself, with my face shocked but stubbornly unmoving. He slowly pulled back his hand and smiled. It was the usual smile like a Spring breeze, sweeping away the stormy clouds to return everything to sunshine, but obscuring the things hidden in his eyes.

After some time, he smiled at me "Can you sing the ballad you were humming earlier again?"

I woodenly nod my head and clear my throat and sing it again. After my song has finished for some time, the two of us are still frozen to the spot. His voice was so low it was barely audible "Why was Ba Ya Er so stupid? Why did he never turn back to look at Yi Zhu? Why did he keep forcing Yi Zhu to try and read his feelings? Why couldn't he have told Yi Zhu how he really felt? He's smarter than the wiliest fox on the plains, so why couldn't be understand that Yi Zhu didn't care about his humble birth and was willing to endure hardship with him?"

I had thought he didn't understand the Xiong Nu language which is why I sang this song. I forgot how well-learned he was, and that during the heyday of the Xiong Nu power, all the Xi Yu kingdoms bowed down to the Xiong Nu so the language was widely spoken in Xi Yu. I was so shocked I asked "You understand Xiong Nu? And you know the folk love story of Ba Ya Er and Yi Zhu?"

He hummed the last refrain "The cloud chased the moon and Ba Ya Er accompanied Yi Zhu. Ten thousand nightingales on the plains could not sing enough about their happiness." His eyes stared at me without wavering "Even though Ba Ya Er did hurt Yi Zhu, but the ballad tells us that they did end up together happily ever after. Do you believe what this song said?" I don't answer the question and tell him "I need to get going."

He turned his head away from me and lightly said "I had hoped that I would never wake up, then you will stay here forever and take care of me. But then you would be worried and sad."

All the tears I was supressing when I was singing came forth at last so I quickly turn around and wipe my tears "Please take care of yourself and get better. I'll come visit you when I get a chance." I finish talking and am about to walk out when he urgently grabbed my hand and said very slowly and carefully "Yu Er, tell me! Who do you care about more? Forget promises and vows. Without taking into account anything else, who do you think about just that little bit more. Who do you want to be with?"

I bit my lip and want to pull my hand back, but he refuses to let go. He asked the same question one more time, each word just as carefully spoken as before. I want to say something, but seeing his fatigue and worn out visage, I was torn between wanting to tell the truth and then not having the heart to tell him. I can't say it out loud so I just jerk my hand out of his.

He sees me like this and the pain in his eyes is so visible, combined with so many other emotions. Finally it all just distills into dead silence. He suddenly let my hand go "Seeing you like this today, I actually already knew the answer. You can go now!"

I'm afraid to turn around and fly out of the room. I'm facing the cold bitter wind as I run into the dark night, my heart unable to calm down.

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 2 - Chapter

13

Chapter 29: Sorrow

My heart really hurts, so without considering the ramifications, I release a long howl to the moon. In a split second, all of Chang An breaks into a cacophony of dog barks and roosters crowing. In what was a dark house the lamplight is lit and people start talking.

I quickly tried to leave the scene of the crime without making any noise. As I took off running, I let out a small smile. A person ought to be able to find joy even during the sad moments. And if their lives are not filled with much happiness, people ought to learn to create their own joyful moments.

Sticking to the darkened corners of the streets, I clear my throat and let out another howl. The same reaction happens again. I howl to the East, I howl to the West, I turn the entire city of Chang An upside down with freaked out animals. The street starts to light up and even the guards at the government estates are nervous. Everyone comes out ready to capture a wolf. Some claim there are three or four, others say there are ten of them.

The beggars on the side of the streets become the most popular people in town. Crowds gather around them asking what they saw. Normally a beggar would never get so much attention, so they are all eager and excited to spout out and gesticulate as to what they saw. Their stories become more and more exaggerated and the crowds start to gasp in shock. Perhaps these days have been too quiet recently so people are not scared by their story and instead get more excited. They appear to be waiting for something exciting to happen.

My eyes shifted a few times and I thought that since I've already caused a commotion, might as well make it even bigger to make myself happier and make the crowds happier. I see a black-cloaked person walk past, and once I confirm the coast is clear, I jump down behind him and knock him out with a bat to the head. I take off his black cloak only to discover he's a government official. Oooooops, this is not ideal. This is more serious than I intended. Oh well! I already knocked him out, it's too late for regrets.

I put on the cloak and tie a handkerchief around my head. I hid on a rooftop and howl once more before starting to run along the roof tops. I'm chased by a crowd of government officials behind me, and lined all along the streets are people watching this show. When I almost kick a guard off the roof, some of the spectators actually clap in excitement. A lone hero can't beat a hundred men, and the guards chasing me are increasing rapidly in numbers. It appears the entire guard retinue of Chang An is out to capture me.

Initially I wanted to taunt them a bit longer, but it turns out that some of them are actually not half bad at martial arts. In the beginning they were all randomly chasing me, but

someone has taken charge and their pursuit has grown organized. I'm slowly getting chased into a dead end. Indeed I'm playing right under the nose of the Emperor! I'm impressed with their skill and hurry to find an exit. If I get captured, that ought to be interesting, but too bad I can't afford to take that risk right now.

Because I don't want to kill anyone, I withhold some of my strength and try to avoid them. I'm looking for a way out....and I flip right into the backyard of the Huo Estate. The guards must know who owns this place so they don't follow me inside. I secretly stick my tongue out at them. Likely a bunch of high level government officials will be knocking on the door in a few minutes, and Uncle Chen can kiss his sleep goodnight.

I sneak into Qu Bing's room and peek inside. There are no maids keeping watch over him, he's just sleeping alone on the pallet. I'm feeling upset and worried. How could Uncle Chen be so careless and not take better care of him?

I walk next to the pallet and lean over to check on him, when he suddenly opens his eyes. I yelp in shock and he immediately pulls me into his embrace. I'm enveloped snugly in his arms, leaving me laughing as I hit his chest "How dare you surprise me! No wonder there wasn't a single maid around!"

He didn't laugh and just said very seriously "I've been waiting for you this entire time. If you didn't return by dawn, I was going to storm over there and grab you back." I humphed at him "You're a thief!" He laughed and kissed my forehead "That would make you the wife of a thief. Why are you dressed like this?"

I made a face at him and tried to struggle out of his arms. I took off the cloak and tossed it on the ground before removing the handkerchief tied around my head. "You're in trouble now. Maybe tomorrow someone will tattle to the Emperor that you are secretly protecting a thief. Tonight I managed to cause a commotion to lure every government official out looking for me."

He put his hands behind his head and laughingly asked "What did you steal?" I wrinkled my nose at him "Nothing, I just punked everyone for fun." He furrowed his eyebrow and indicated for me to come over. I crawl under the blankets and snuggle in his arms "You don't look like someone who was just ill. How are you this energetic? Are you uncomfortable anywhere right now?"

He frowned "Everything feels normal, but there is one area that's uncomfortable." I was immediately so nervous "Where? We'll summon the royal physician at dawn tomorrow. No, let's have Uncle Chen summon him right now." I was about to jump off the pallet when he grabbed my hand and then slowly slid it down past his stomach "This area is quite uncomfortable."

My hand could feel his arousal "You....." I was so mortified and annoyed that my face was beet red. He laughed and lightly murmured in my ear "How long as it been since you willingly snuggled with me? So there is something good that comes out of getting sick. If I knew this, I would have gotten sick earlier. Since it's such a rare occurrence for you to jump into my arms, if I didn't have the appropriate reaction, I would be insulting the "icy cold beauty" that is you."

I spit out "You're a lech!" He kissed my cheek and sighed "Yu Er, are you willing to bear

my child? I can't marry you right now, but I'm going to be yours for this entire lifetime. It's bound to happen sooner or later. If you don't care about official titles, I don't want to restrain myself anymore." I turn sideways to avoid his kiss and didn't have a chance to respond to his question when Uncle Chen was outside "Young master!"

Huo Qu Bing ignored him and continued to tease me and ask in a low voice "Yes or no?" I'm too afraid to breathe, worried that Uncle Chen will hear what is going on inside the room. But Qu Bing doesn't care the least, and the more nervous I am, the more it gets him all into it. He decided to just kiss me on the cheek with a loud resounding smack.

"Young master! Young....." Uncle Chen's voice trailed off into silence for some time before "Young master....."

Huo Qu Bing said in an exasperated voice "Why do people keep interrupting at the most crucial moment?" He called out "What?" Uncle Chen explained "The Guard Master asks to see you, saying a thief appears to have snuck into our estate. He wants the young master to investigate and I came to ask you what to do?"

Huo Qu Bing replied "What so hard you need to ask me? Can't you decide what to do?" Uncle Chen stammered "Our estate is protected no less securely than the Palace, anyone entering would encounter dozens of dogs. Plus today there are rumors of a wolf commotion in the city. So I was thinking.....thinking that....." I can tell he's having a hard time saying it so I help out "Uncle Chen, it's me. I snuck into the estate tonight."

Uncle Chen let out a sigh of relief "That was what I suspected, so I already sent the Guard Master home. But after that the an even higher official come by saying that a violent thief had knocked out the Crown Prince's tutor with a bat to the head. The tutor is furious and has vowed that the thief must be captured, otherwise he'll make sure the guard officials all get in trouble."

Huo Qu Bing laid down and with a lazy expression turned to look at me. He flicked me on the forehead and said with a laugh "Fine! I'll make a trip to the tutor's estate in a little bit. There must be an even more dire situation involved, so tell me who else came by?"

I was already wondering why a high court official was all wrapped up tightly and wandering around Chang An late at night by himself. So this was what happened? I whisper in Huo Qu Bing's ear and he laughed and gave me a strange look, shaking his head indicating he didn't agree with me.

Uncle Chen piped up "Li Gan is here waiting for you, claiming he's here on orders of General Li as the Palace Commander to ensure the safety of Chang An. He asks for your cooperation to make sure the assassin is caught." Huo Qu Bing's expression turned cold "Li Gan is calling the person an assassin?" Uncle Chen softly answered "Yes."

The Palace Commander is in charge of the safety of the Palace, so if they are calling me an assassin, aren't they asserting that I was planning to assassinate the.....Emperor? I pitifully say "I think I'm in big trouble now. With such a huge mountain falling down on me, is Li Yan intending to crush me to death?" Huo Qu Bing immediately said "Li Yan? What do you mean by that?"

I cover my mouth and just stare at him, my eyes shifting but I don't answer his question. He shook his head "I'm not sure what is making you so worried." He turned to Uncle

Chen “Since third brother Li has already guessed it’s Yu Er, then don’t lie to him. Tell him the truth – it was Huo Qu Bing and my woman who got bored tonight and decided to play a prank. I’m sorry we disturbed them. Right now we’re resting on the pallet so if he wants to arrest someone tell him to barge right in. Since I’ve never seen the inside of a prison cell in Chang An, tell them I’m thanking them in advance for showing me around there.”

I pull his robe “You can’t say this, you can’t.....” Uncle Chen was outside and quiet for some time, and he finally said “Yes” and quickly left. From the sound of his, his footsteps are unsteady like he’s drunk.

I lay down on the pillow and make a face “Huo Qu Bing, are you purposely messing with Li Gan or with me? Why do I feel like you’re upset with me?” He laughed “Half and half, but my annoyance isn’t just regular annoyance, it’s unsatisfied bedroom annoyance.” He brushed my hand aside and kissed me on the nose “Li Gan is very thoughtful and this is a chess match he orchestrated. If I play the match with him, I might not win, so why not just play stupid and mess up his entire chess match. Let’s see what he does about that? If he gets upset and makes one wrong move, we can use that to taunt him.”

This man doesn’t follow the rules of military tactics and he does things without following normal protocol. If I’m comparing shamelessness with him, I will clearly lose. I turn around and lay down to sleep, deciding to ignore him. He laughed “So you’re just going to sleep?” I huff “It’s almost sunrise and I’ve been getting exhausted on the rooftops of Chang An all night. If you don’t let me sleep, I’m going back to my place.”

He embraced me from behind and softly said “Go to sleep!” I smile and then ask “In the morning, are you really going to pay a visit to the estate of the Crown Prince tutor?” He laughed “You call me shameless, but your behavior was pretty low as well. He’s the Crown Prince’s tutor and not a random stranger. I ought to pay him a personal visit.” Word is that the tutor has a shrew for a wife so he’s found a beautiful and elegant mistress on the side. He tried to keep this a secret, but when I ran the dancing houses I learned about all the juicy scandalous details about the court officials.

When I heard from Uncle Chen that the guy I knocked out was the tutor to the Crown Prince, I immediately realized that he was sneaking home from his mistress’s place. I gave Qu Bing an idea to send word to the tutor asking if his temper is more important, or his wife’s temper? The tutor will obviously let this issue go rather than escalate it. Who cares about some thief if he’s dealing with an irate wife. Too bad Qu Bing has decided to be a gentlemen on this matter.

My sleepiness hits and I yawn. He quickly says again “Go to sleep!” and I murmur a yes before falling into peaceful slumber.

.....

When I wake up it’s already time for dinner, but Qu Bing is not home. Uncle Chen said he’s in the Palace and sent word that he’ll be late coming home so I should eat dinner first. I suddenly remembered that I left the house so quickly I didn’t say anything to Hong Gu, so I decide to go back to Luo Yu House.

The moment I enter the house, Hong Gu walked up “The Shi Enterprises.....:” She hit herself on the forehead “It’s not the Shi Enterprises anymore....Tian Cao sent word asking

you to please visit the Shi Estate.” I hesitated so Hong Gu urged me “They are insisting you please go, apparently Jiu Ye is very sick.”

When I left last night he was not doing so well, so my heart remains concerned about him. I quickly say “I’m off to the Shi Estate. Please keep some dinner for me, and if nothing is terribly wrong, I’ll be home shortly.” Hong Gu smiled and said yes.

I arrive at the Shi Estate only to find Tian Cao sitting outside on a carriage waiting for me “I’ve been waiting for you! Jiu Ye is outside the city in the Qing Estate, I’ll take you there right now.” I quickly ask “What happened? If he’s not well, how come he left the city?” Tian Cao sighed “Jiu Ye was always prone to colds and this time he’s especially hit hard. He wanted to not worry you so he tried to pretend he was fine, but he lost consciousness shortly after you left. The royal physician was by and ordered us to move Jiu Ye to the Qing Estate.”

My heart was aching. I can’t pretend I don’t know why he got to be so ill. To cut off an emotion is already such a painful process, why can’t he stop trying to be considerate of me and start taking better care of himself? If something were to really happen to him, how could I bear it? How I could seek my own happiness if that happened?

It’s a blanket of chilly white frost in Chang An, but the Qing Estate benefits from the hot springs nearby and already the first signs of Spring are appearing. Some flowers and greenery are sprouting but neither Tian Cao nor I are in any mood to appreciate it. I run straight for Jiu Ye’s room. He was still unconscious and his forehead was burning hot. Sweat beaded down his face and I took the handkerchief from the maid “Let me do it!”

I’ve switched many handkerchiefs but his body temperature still doesn’t go down. His lips are starting to crack and I moisten a towel and gently wipe his lips. He’s so feverish but he keeps calling out “Yu Er” and each time he called me I reply “I’m here.” The pain in his face seems to lesson and he appears to smile. Tian Cao spoke up “Now you know why I insisted you come. Your presence makes a huge difference to Jiu Ye’s illness.”

Xiao Feng arrived and appeared to say something to Tian Cao, hopping around urgently. Tian Cao called me over but Xiao Feng wanted to object but Tian Cao ignored him. “Xiao Yu, I don’t want to keep anything from you. General Huo has sent someone to the Shi Estate multiple times to look for you. And he’s already been by personally even though it’s the middle of the night. If you want to leave, I’ll send someone to take you home.”

After keeping vigil all night, I can see that it’s almost sunrise. I’m so anxious with worry and exhausted that I simply sigh and walk back to the water basin to pour some cold water on my face. I look at the still unconscious Jiu Ye “No need. I’ll stay here until Jiu Ye wakes up.” It was until noon that Jiu Ye’s fever finally went down and my tightly wound heart finally relaxed slightly.

Jiu Ye opened his eyes and when he saw me, he smiled “They finally found you. Where did you run to in Xi Yu? I’ve turned that place inside out and still I couldn’t find a trace of you. Yu Er, please don’t be mad at me. It’s my fault. After I read all the handkerchiefs in your box, that was when I knew what a horrible mistake I made.....”

I was so shocked I wanted to say something but the doctor next to me shook his head. I walked over and gently said to Jiu Ye “I’m going to get a drink of water and will be right

back.” Jiu Ye looked at me with worry and I smiled “I’ll be back after getting a drink. I won’t go anywhere.” His nervousness eased and he nodded his head.

I walked outside and Tian Cao spoke up first “Didn’t his fever break? What’s going on? Why is Jiu Ye not coherent?” The doctor explained “Don’t worry. After a prolonged fever, the fever has broken but he’s not fully conscious yet. His mental energy is weak and he’s thinking based on what he wants to remember and not based on rational thought. He will naturally try to forget the bad memories and just remember what makes him happy. After a good sleep he’ll regain coherence. But right now Jiu Ye mustn’t be stimulated with anything negative. His body and mental state are in a relaxed and safe place right now, but it’s also highly vulnerable to shock. If you aren’t careful, he can get worse. You guys just let him talk and follow along. Try to get him to sleep, and after he wakes up, he’ll be all fine.”

Tian Cao looked at me and I nodded back. I walked inside and saw that Jiu Ye was staring at the doorway the entire time. He saw me come in and his face showed his unfettered joy. It’s a happiness that isn’t hidden with any other emotion and seeing it so suddenly makes my heart jolt. I assist Jiu Ye to rest on a comfortable cushion and take the food from the maid to feed him. He indicated for me to open the window.

Outside the window is a flowing hot spring. and the hot steam makes it feel like we’re in a fairyland. “.....I heard that one time grandmother was playing the zither in this room and grandfather had to go discuss a business deal and had to leave. But he was reluctant to leave so he kept looking backward at grandmother as he walked out. So the servants call this corridor the “Turning Neck Corridor”, and when grandfather found out, he was happy rather than upset.....” I don’t know when the room emptied out until it’s just Jiu Ye and me left. Jiu Ye’s voice is the only sound in this otherwise silent room.

He held my hand “Grandmother wasn’t in the best of health and she died before I was born. I often think of my grandparents walking along this corridor holding hands. If my life was half of what my grandfather experienced, then it will be worth it. Yu Er, am I too late with these words? Will you still let me view the flowers with you?”

My hands were trembling but he held on tightly. I didn’t answer for the longest time and his eyes started to show despair so deep and thick it could drown a person in it. It was so painful to see that I could feel my heart breaking into pieces. I nod my head with certainty “I’m willing. Once you are all better, we can go visit Tian Shan (the Sky Mountains) to see the snow lilies.”

My words are like a magic elixir and it calms the tempest in his eyes. His grip on my hands loosened and he started laughing with joy “The Heavens are indeed fair to me. Thank you for giving me Yu Er.” My eyes filled with tears. The Heavens, you are surely not fair. He lost his loved ones when he was young, he’s crippled, and even if he has all the riches in the world, it has turned into the world’s most vicious chain locking his freedom in a vise.

“Yu Er, are you crying? Did I make you cry again.....” I forced a smile “No, I’m happy. The doctor says you need to keep calm and get plenty of rest. Do you want to sleep now?” He reached out and wiped the tears from my eyes and pulled me into his tight embrace. He’s so forceful it feels like he wants to lock me in his embrace forever “Yu Er, Yu Er, Yu

Er....let's never be apart ever again. Since you left, I've hurried to do everything so I can disappear from Chang An. Once I arrange everything, we can go to Xi Yu. Buy two of the fastest horses and we can quickly and thoroughly disappear."

"Yes" and my tears continue to fall on his shoulder. He continued "I've always wanted to be a real doctor. Once I settle everything in Xi Yu, why don't we open a small clinic. I can treat patients and you can gather medicine for me. I'm sure business will be swell." I reply "With your talent at healing, business will be so good we will barely have time to even have tea." He countered "That won't work. Patients are important but I want to spend time with you. Why don't we hang a sign that we'll only see twenty patients a day."

"Okay. And if anyone forces you to see them, I'll kick them out." "We can build a cabin in the Sky Mountains where we can spend the Summers." Everything sounded so real I laughed "In the Winter we can go see the volcanoes." "Yu Er, the fish in the Gu Nai Shi Lake are supposedly quite delicious. I can grill some for you. You've never sampled my grilled fish, right? It's a recipe I perfected from the classic texts. Rumor has it that Huang Di (the first Emperor) himself ate it. I don't know if it's real or legend, but I'm sure the flavor is out of this world."

"Um hmm, I heard the herders say that the Gu Nai Shi Lake waters change color with the seasons. It changes from blue to green to almost white, almost twenty different colors. I visited twice with the wolf pack so I've only seen two colors." "Why don't we live on the lake for a year then, so we can see all twenty colors. Yu Er, where else do you want to go?"

.....

Jiu Ye fell asleep on my shoulder, his face relaxed and with a smile on his lips.

I gently place him on the pillow and turn around to look out the window. The sun is setting outside and the dusk is bathed in a blood red light. I turn back to look at Jiu Ye's happy visage and suddenly all the strength in my body disappears. I sink down to the ground and stare at Jiu Ye and start bawling. But I don't dare make any sound, so I bite down on my hands to keep myself from crying out. But my tears rush forward like an unending flood.

Dear Heavens, I pray of you, please be kind to him just this once. When he wakes up tomorrow, let him forget everything that happened today. Forget everything, forget everything.....

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 2 - Chapter

14

Chapter 30: Passion Dance

I have no idea how I managed to return home. My entire body feels empty and I'm so exhausted I just want to collapse. When I enter the room I discover that the ceramic appliances have all been swept on the floor. The entire floor is a mess and I sigh with a heavy heart. I turn and rush to the Huo Estate.

Uncle Chen sees me and immediately calls out "The young master rushed home yesterday from the Palace, stopping by Yi Ping Ju to buy a few of your favorite snacks. He was so happy to be able to make it home in time to join you for dinner. He saw you weren't here and I said I had sent someone to pick you up. He wanted to go pick you up personally. He was so excited when he left, but he didn't come home all night. I thought he spent the night at your place. But when he came home this morning at dawn, he didn't drink a sip of water or eat a morsel of food. He locked himself in his room and no one was allowed inside. Before you arrived, he just left the house with the worst expression on his face. I heard from Hong Gu that he didn't eat anything yesterday as well and spent the night waiting for you in your room."

Uncle Chen tried to stay mellow "Ms. Yu, Jiu Ye is indeed a good man, and we indeed owe him greatly....." and his face looked apologetic "But our young master is unwaveringly devoted to you. Because of you, he even turned down the Emperor's marriage decree. Other than the Empress and the General Great Wei, he's upset all the other relatives in the family. I genuinely am sorry to you for what I did and I don't want to say anymore. But.....ay!"

Qu Bing just got better, and despite looking like he's completely recovered, there is no way he can endure this type of self-torture. Because I was so worried, my tone of voice was overly stern with him "Why didn't any of you counsel him?" I said it and immediately realized how silly I was, Qu Bing would never listen to anyone's advice. I apologize to Uncle Chen "I'm sorry for saying that. Do you know where Qu Bing went?" He shook his head "He wouldn't let anyone follow him. He might've gone to see his mother, or maybe to the Princess's estate, or perhaps to General Gong Xun's estate. Or somewhere to drink."

I turn around and head out "I'll go find him." From Princess Pingyang's estate to General Gong Xun's estate to the Chen estate, plus all the dancing houses and drinking halls in Chang An, he's nowhere to be found. When I leave Tian Xiang House, it's already dark of the night. Standing under the lantern outside Tian Xiang House, I stare into the pitch black night. Qu Bing, where are you?

I suddenly have a sliver of hope and wonder if maybe he went home. I hurry back to the Huo Estate but the door guard sees me and shakes his head. “The General has not returned yet. Housekeeper Chen has sent people searching for him but no one can find him.” I turn to walk back into the night without saying a word. Suddenly I think of one place he might be. It’s just past the 15th of the month and there is a round moon in the sky. It shines a silver light on a mountain full of Lover’s Vines.

I follow the side of the Lover’s Vines and run around the mountain side. “Qu Bing!” “Qu Bing!”The sound of my voice reverberates through the canyons, tossing and turning, but it still remains just my voice. From the bottom of the mountain to the top, the entire mountain responds to my calls with only the sound of the wind rustling through the Lover’s Vines. Huo Qu Bing, where are you? Huo Qu Bing, are you leaving me?

Since two days ago, my entire being has been strung tighter than a taut string and I’ve not even rested properly. I can no longer endure the weight of my sorrow and I sink down on the ground in exhaustion. My face contorts into a grimace and I start making this noise that sounds like I’m crying and laughing at the same time.

During this period of time, I was like a soybean between two rock plates. I was about to be crushed into a million tiny pieces under the pressure of their two rocks. Those two rocks are in pain, but did they not know my pain?

How can Huo Qu Bing not understand. Since long ago he has been to me the bone of my bones, the blood of my blood. If I wanted to pick Jiu Ye, I would have left a long time ago and not wait until now.

A pair of hands pulled my hands away from my face and dark eyes stared at me without blinking. He said nothing, just staring at me. I thought he wouldn’t show up so I blink a few times to make sure he’s here. I dumbly ask “Do you still want me?” In his eyes flashed pain and joy and he said each word carefully “Before I had you I said I would never let you go. Now that I have you, I will say with even more certainty...I am never letting you go.”

My heart, which has been perched on a precipice, finally returned to its normal spot. I let out a relieved sigh and my entire body fell forward into his arms “I’m so tired. So tired. So tired! Please don’t be mad at me. Jiu Ye, in order to treat your illness, he’s got very sick. So I stayed there.....” He suddenly kissed me and stopped what I was saying. It was so passionate it felt almost rough.

I was so fatigued that my brain wasn’t working so I ask stupidly “Don’t you want to know what happened?” His eyes are no longer somber like before and was now twinkling again. He smiled and kissed me again “All I need to know is that I am the only person who can do this.” He hesitated for a moment “Since you came back, he must be fine now?” “The fever has broken and the doctor says that the fever, though dangerous, helped shake away the chill in his body. He’ll be fine after a period of careful recovery.”

He stared at me “Yu Er, I’m sorry. No matter what, you two met first. And in this entire situation, I was the one who didn’t do things in a completely honorable manner. I’m also to blame for the situation today. A person is not like a plant or a tree, how can feelings be swept so away so easily? Even regular friends wouldn’t want to see each other in emotional pain. Plus there are emotional knots that only time can untangle, and are easier

said than done.”



[See above: those two —————> they be making out soon. Let your imagination fly~]

Even though Uncle Chen apologized already, but that day Huo Qu Bing just left without showing a shred of remorse. Because of his sudden illness, I didn't want to mention the unpleasantness of the past, so I chose to let it go. This is the first time he's said something like this. He's not pressuring me, but rather giving me as much time as I need. He has chosen to trust me. My heart swelled with emotion, and any lingering frustration in me just dissipated completely. I reach forward and tightly embrace him. There is nothing I need to say, my actions have conveyed to him my response. He sighed with happiness and tightly embraced me back.

Our bodies were tightly pressed against each other and suddenly I felt something hard pressing against me. Our tender emotions suddenly morphed into a heady mood and he shifted his body and apologized “I wasn't thinking anything at all, it simply had a mind of its own.”

I've never seen him slightly shy like this and all I can do is laugh. He was tense for a moment before lowering his head and nibbling on my neck “Yu Er, I really want you. Are you willing?” I bury my face in his chest and softly laugh, not answering his question. He also laughed “So does that mean yes? Yu Er, what if you get pregnant?”

I answer confidently “So what! If we have a baby together, then we'll have a baby. It's not like we don't have the means to raise a child.”

I thought he would be happy, but instead he grows silent. His face is expressionless and he calmly asked me “Even if you get pregnant I still can't marry you. Do you know what that means? Do you know how people will talk about you?” I nod my head and he picked me up in one swift move and turned towards the deeper part of the mountain. I was confused, why wasn't he headed back to the estate? I thought to myself that there is nothing in the world this man won't dare do, and I suddenly lost all color in my face “What are you doing? You can't possibly be thinking of doing that.....there?”

He smiled like this was perfectly normal “My Yu Er knows me so well! There is a hot spring over there and we won't be cold if we are in it. Between the Heavens and the earth and the water, can you imagine what it will be like? It will surely be much more interesting than in a bedroom. Plus I've been so pent up for so long, now that we've decided, I don't want to wait another moment longer.”

“But....but the sun is almost rising!” He gently placed me on a rock next to the hot spring and was taking off my clothes and answering me “Isn't that even better? At the time when day and night meet, the books say that it is when the yin and the yang converge. Remember those books you asked me to get for you? It states that this is the ideal time for consummating a relationship.....” He was still talking when he was already pulling me into the water and his voice trailed off.

He was afraid I would be cold so he pulled me in quickly. He still had a circlet around his hair so I reached over and plucked it off. His hair spilled around his face in the water and

suddenly this image seems so familiar to me. I can't help but smile. He startled for a moment, and then reacted by pulling me in for a deep kiss. It was such a long kiss that we are both adept at martial arts but we're still out of breath by the time we emerge from the water and break apart.

He laughed "I had almost forgotten my wish that way. That day in the water, all I wanted was to kiss you. But you were so feisty. All I did was hold your hand and you almost unmanned me. Yu Er, if you had really kicked me that day, wouldn't you be regretting that right now?" I humph at him "I would never regret it."

"Then I'm the one who regrets it. I regret you so were close that day but I couldn't do anything. But today I can....." and he laughed and make an expression like a wolf spotting a snack. He pulled me in and his kisses were raining all over me, on my face, on my neck, on my chest.....

.....

The royal physician said that Qu Bing was all recovered now and everything was fine. But he waited an entire day before prescribing the medicine, which wasn't even medicine, but just some reminders to eat normally. Why Dr. Zhang took one day from diagnosing Qu Bing to prescribing his treatment is something that Uncle Chen and I both understand but neither want to mention it in front of Qu Bing. [Dr. Zhang clearly consulted Jiu Ye and gave him the diagnosis, and it was Jiu Ye who prescribed the treatment.]

When Dr. Zhang was leaving, he saw me holding back what I wanted to say and he understood enough to say casually "Yesterday I had a talk with Jiu Ye about medicine. Compared to him, all my learnings appear meaningless...." I understand he's telling me that Jiu Ye must be better now. If time can heal a person physically, time can surely heal a person emotionally. Right?

I slowly walk into the room and from the window I can see Qu Bing studying the prescription. He hears my footsteps and look up towards me with a smile. I want to return his smile but I can't. I just hurry my steps and walk into the room. He puts my hand firmly in his to warm it up. The warmth in his hand slowly chases away the chill in my heart as well, and I turn around and grab his hands tightly, giving him a warm smile.

Qu Bing appears to realize something, and then he promptly acts like he has no clue. He looks at the prescription and lets out a long sigh, clearly not intending to follow it "I can't eat this, I can't eat that. There isn't much left for me to eat then." He saw me glaring at him and he quickly changed expressions and sidled up next to me with a goofy smile "Don't be mad! Don't be mad! If I can sample you everyday, then I'll surely....." Before he finished what he was saying, he was flying out the door and ducked to avoid a vase thrown at his head.

The vase shattered at the door and some of the maids are so frightened they immediately kneel down. He smiled at me through the window "I've got to go to the Palace for a bit. I'll be back soon." I chase after him "Wait, I have something to ask you." He didn't turn around but just waved his hand "I know what you're worried about. It's not like we haven't snuck into the royal grounds before. That day we were even caught by the Emperor himself. If they want to tattle on us, let them. The Emperor won't care at all....." His voice trailed off as he disappeared from sight. I think about it, and realize

that Li Gan doesn't have any solid proof anyway. There is really not much to be afraid of at this point.

I turn around and the two maids Qing Wu and Xiang Die are still kneeling there "Why are you still kneeling? Hurry and get up." The two maids check to make sure Huo Qu Bing has walked away before patting their chests and getting up. Xiang Die moves fast and has grabbed a broom and is sweeping up the broken vase shards while saying "I've been a servant since I was small and have gotten used to kneeling as the first response when I hear my masters throwing things. My second response is saying "your servant I deserve to die." This happens regardless of whatever was happening in the room to cause the throwing things, which we know nothing about."

I laugh "Why are you all so afraid of the General? I have never seen him punish a servant." Qing Wu smiled but said nothing, while Xiang Die thought about it "Yeah! He really has never punished us before. I don't know, we're just scared. I hear other servants all hope to serve a young master who might like her and make her a concubine. But in our estate this has never happened. We are all just serving the General....." Xiang Die suddenly turned red when she realized what she was saying.

I hid my laughter "I'm going to tell the General all of this." Xiang Die and Qing Wu both get up and come plead with me, so I clear my throat "I'll keep quiet about this, but you have to do as I say from now on." Qing Wu quietly replied "Wonderful miss, don't we already do everything you want. Whatever you ask us we candidly reply. But when the Madam asks us, we try not to say too much and the things we have to answer we try to keep it short."

I sighed and hugged them both "Both sisters are good hearted, taking care of someone like me without any family. Thank you dear sisters. If you're done cleaning, let's go to Yi Ping Ju to eat." They smile and nod their heads. Xiang Die sighed "You! You're mean one moment, tender the next. No wonder even someone like the General doesn't know what to do with you."

I'm smiling but inside my heart I sigh. These two maids are hand selected by Uncle Chen to serve Qu Bing, and they are really good to me. But everyone else in the estate, because of Wei Shao Er and Gong Xun Aou and those folks, are polite to me on the surface but who knows what they are thinking deep down. Since Qu Bing's illness, when Wei Shao Er sees me there is less animosity from her, but she is still very cool towards me. I rather not seek out unpleasantness so I try to avoid her when I can. I figure she also doesn't want to see me, so the two of us rarely interact.

My relationship with Qu Bing is so obvious it doesn't even need to be explained. From the Emperor on top all the way down to the lowest foot soldier in the army, everyone knows I'm his girl. Huo Qu Bing has never tried to hide it, and with his close friends and subordinates like Zhao Puo Nu, he treats me like I'm his wife. Even then, everyone pretends that they have no clue what is going on. From the Emperor on top all the way down to the lowest servant in the estate, everyone treats me like a young maiden.

They pretend as if I'm just an innocent maiden Qu Bing brought out one day to hang out with, and if they all closed their eyes to go to sleep, the next day I will have disappeared. From Winter until Spring, from Spring until Summer, with each night of sleep, I still

continue to appear before them the next day. And they still stubbornly refuse to acknowledge me.

When the Palace holds a banquet, I rarely attend. But this time it is for the Empress's birthday and she wants Qu Bing to bring me along. Even though she says nothing, but her little gesture such as this is like a tacit recognition of my relationship with Qu Bing. It was due to her influence that her siblings held back their dislike of me. She made my life easier, and for that I am grateful. Usually I'm dispirited when I go to the Palace, but today I purposely get all dressed up.

I arrange a Han hairstyle and use a popular Han accessory to secure my hair. I braid a purple crystal hair accessory through my hair and it glistens as it peeks out from under my dark locks, appearing like stars in the dark night. The largest crystal is the size of a thumb and hangs right over my forehead.

My outfit is also in the popular Chang An style, but I change it up a little. On top of the silk I add a thin layer of gossamer which gives it an illusion of depth and airiness. When I move it looks even more alluring. When Qu Bing saw me, his eyes lit up and he smiled "I always thought you are the most beautiful when you wear the Xi Yu outfits, but it's clear you look just as lovely wearing a Han style attire. Clearly you just never made the effort in the past."

When we enter the Palace, the Empress is seated on a dais receiving the well-wishes of hundreds of courtiers. Qu Bing tried to pull me up to wish her a happy birthday but I stubbornly refused. "You go ahead. My presence is enough for the Empress to know my heart. If you're so public with me here, it will make things difficult for the Empress." Qu Bing looked somber "Sometimes I wish you were stupider and not as considerate of others. That way you won't have to endure this by yourself."

I look towards the Crown Prince's tutor and his shrew wife, who are currently bowing to the Empress "Like them? Is that happiness? Everyone sees them as a couple and compliment them, but I can care less about that."

Huo Qu Bing released my hand and went up to greet the Empress. Once the banquet started and people were already dining, Li Yan finally arrived. She looked tired and in her royal attire it made her look precious. She passed by and everyone held their breaths, afraid of one gust of air might harm this delicate extraordinary beauty.

The formerly raucous banquet turned silent because of her entrance and we can all hear the sound of her skirts swishing as she walked and her jade pieces clicking against each other. She glided in front of the Empress and kneeled down to bow. Empress Wei smiled "No need! You're not feeling well, a formal bow is not needed. I've received your wishes." But Li Yan still formally bowed her head before getting up.

When she went to sit down, Liu Che naturally helped her into her seat. He said something to Li Yan and she furrowed her eyebrows and shook her head. Liu Che gave her a smiling look that said he was going to let her be. He turned to Empress Wei, and though he was still smiling, his eyes no longer had the look of tender caring. In the eyes of the public, Li Yan went from acting like she didn't want to steal the Empress's thunder to now showing clearing to the courtiers who was more important in the eyes of Liu Che.

I looked around the banquet. How many people here want the future Emperor to be Liu Buo (Li Yan's son)? Or how many just want to see the Wei family tumble from power so they can win in the aftermath? Those who support the Wei family are obvious and a powerful lot, but they are a clear target for those who want to help the Li family, since they can operate under the shadows.

My eyes meet Huo Qu Bing's and he mouthed the words "You're the most beautiful" to me. I pout at him and act all disbelieving of his clearly false words, but inside I feel full of sweetness and contentment.

Li Guang Li was watching my silent interaction with Huo Qu Bing and he scoffed loudly. He got up and addressed the Emperor and Empress "The various Xi Yu kingdoms have sent their twelve best dancing girls to perform a Xi Yu dance especially choreographed for the your highness's birthday." Liu Che smiled and looked at the Empress, who announced that they can perform.

Even though it was supposed to be a Xi Yu dance, because it is intended for the Empress, it incorporated more Han flavor and tempered the usual free-spirited passion of the nomadic people. The dance is graceful and the lead dancer is a tall woman who dances like a butterfly, her every move seemingly effortless. I can't help but nod my head, what a truly top-notch dancer. To my surprise, I see Li Yan also nodding her head and our eyes meet for the first time tonight. Her eyes are clear like a lake in Autumn, like one can see into the depth of her soul. I remember the first time we met and how her eyes were rich with emotion. She's like a completely different person now.

She suddenly smiled and gave me a pitying look while shaking her head. I wanted to smile back at her, as if asking her which of the two of us is more deserving of being pitied? But then I realized what a pointless exercise it was. Why do we need to keep pressuring each other? I turned away and stopped looking at her. When the crowd began to heartily applaud is when I snap back to attention. Liu Che was quite pleased and offered to reward the dancers.

Empress Wei was about to say something when Li Yan interjected "These dancers came all the way from Xi Yu hundreds of miles to reach the Han dynasty. They are all alone without any support. There is no reward you can give them greater than giving them a family. Since the most eligible men in Chang An are all gathered here today, why doesn't the Emperor play matchmaker today and give them each a home."

A dancer's life is not forever and they need to find a safe harbor when they are still young. They are bound to a life as a concubine or even worse. If they can give birth to a son or child, in this foreign place they might have a chance to find some security. All the dancers brightened up with hope to hear this, but the lead dancer just took a quick survey of the entire banquet.

Liu Che saw all the girls light up with hope and he looked rather tender, turning to give Empress Wei a smiling look. Empress Wei appeared to remember something and her face turned red and she lowered her head. Li Yan immediately averted her eyes and looked towards the sky. Li Gan, who had been secretly staring at her, spilled the wine in his cup when his hands shook.

Liu Che turned to the Xi Yu dancing girls "I've heard that the Xi Yu ladies use horse

racing to show their affection to the man they desire. They can also use dance to convey their interest. I want to emulate the Xi Yu customs today, and I hereby allow you each to pick the man you want.”

A song started up and this time it’s a genuine Xi Yu tune. It’s immediately passionate and wild, the dancers turning sultry and limber as their bodies react to the music. Li Yan turned to smile at me and my heart chilled. I was wondering why she was doing all this. Now that Liu Che as given a royal decree that these ladies can choose, if one of the girls chooses Huo Qu Bing, then.....



[One more friendly reminder, above is Koala approved canon Yu Er and Huo Qu Bing. Enjoy the pretty.]

Last time Huo Qu Bing opposed Liu Che’s wishes with an excuse that he won’t start a family until the Xiong Nu are eradicated. But today Liu Che has told the entire court and the Xi Yu dancers that he will let them pick. If Huo Qu Bing were to oppose him again in public..... I refuse to think any further, just gripping my skirt tightly and staring at the dancers.

Huo Qu Bing has clearly figured out Li Yan’s intentions as well and he got up to leave. But two girls had already danced right up to him and blocked his path. Huo Qu Bing’s demeanor turned cold and he returned to his seat with a small smile and started to drink, paying no attention to the two girls dancing in front of him. I let out a sigh of relief that there is still time. If Huo Qu Bing isn’t planning to accept both of them, then these two girls need to first use dance to determine a victor between them.

Li Guang Li’s expression turned ugly and jealous. I realized now that neither of these two girls were in cahoots with them in advance. They really just both want Huo Qu Bing. I turn to stare at the two girls with an exasperated expression, not sure if I should be proud or worried. The lead dancer is the most beautiful and eye catching one and all the young men and old lechers alike have clearly been eyeing her. Right now she starts to dance in tune to the music and moving towards Huo Qu Bing. The atmosphere in the entire banquet grows more excited.

A few people who have no inkling of what is happening start cheering “Such a beauty surely can only match with a true hero.” I don’t know if they are just brown nosing to Huo Qu Bing or seeking their own demise. A row of military officials seated next to Huo Qu Bing and Wei Qing stare coldly and dispassionately at this scene, not even paying attention to dancing girls who are before them. Li Guang Li and his toady ministers try to fan the flames so that the mood in the banquet is the extreme of hot and cold coming from the two sides.

The other two girls see the lead dancer and grow embarrassed and frustrated. But they cannot compete with her so they twirl away. The lead dancer smiles like a flower and her beauty flutters with her every dance step. She brushes over Huo Qu Bing, who continues to quietly and calmly drink his wine.

The moment she kneels before Huo Qu Bing and offers him a drink is the moment she has made her selection. I can’t worry about anything anymore, I have to stop this now. I turn

to meet Ri Chan's eyes and he nodded his head.

I take off my shoes and put my wrist bells on my ankle. I slowly stand up and clap loudly three times. I disrupt the Xi Yu tune and everyone turns to look at me. Huo Qu Bing looks stunned but I just smile and wink at him.

A fast and carefree tune comes from Ri Chan's short flute, akin to a feisty horse running through the plains, or a small bird gliding through the air. I follow the music and dance towards Huo Qu Bing. In every beat of the song, I stomp my foot and the bells add a new cadence to the rhythm. In the beginning I wasn't quite ready yet so I make a few mistakes, which causes the dancing girls to titter. I glare at them and make a face. Humph! If they haven't danced for seven or eight years like me and still dance as well as I'm doing, then I'll let them make fun of me.

My dancing becomes smoother and the wild abandoned sensation of dancing on the plains returns to my body. Plus I know martial arts, so my dancing is even more light and controlled than the average dancer. The passion dance of a Xiong Nu girl, I may not be perfect at it, but it's riveting nonetheless. Huo Qu Bing smiled and downed his wine, staring at me with unfettered joy and pride.

Because it was so unexpected, no one at the banquet knew how to react, just staring at me with their mouths open. It was dead silent. The bells on my ankles are crisp and clear, like the laughter of a young girl floating in the wind. It makes a person turn mellow and content.

The lead dancer quietly looked at me for awhile and then smiled at me before changing her dance steps. It was also a Xiong Nu dance. We dance around each other in front of Huo Qu Bing, who has stopped drinking and appeared to be genuinely enjoying watching me dance, and then watching her dance, almost like he was trying to decide which girl was better. This person was like the grass on the plains, turning livelier under the basking sunlight. I'm secretly stewing inside so I act even more cheerful. I turn towards him and use my flowing skirts to hide that fact that I'm launching a kick towards him. Too bad he was anticipating it and his hand was right there to grab my foot.

The tune from the flute becomes more urgent but I remain standing in place with a strange stance and a smile, moving my upper body in sync with the music. Thank god Ri Chan is the one accompanying me with the music, because he sees something is odd with me and immediately his tune slows down. That in turn causes the leader dancer to be caught off guard and she misses a few steps and almost slips. Everyone turns to look at her and forgets about me standing there all weird.

The moment she regains her balance she shoots an angry look over at Ri Chan playing the flute. To her surprise, she sees not an ordinary musician but a dashing richly attired young man. His wavy hair and high nose reveals that he's also from the desert region. Ri Chan makes a slight apologetic bow to her and she suddenly turns red faced but flips her hair at him. I'm really losing my ability to keep a smile plastered my face. Even though there are dances where the feet don't move and only the upper body sways to the rhythm, but right now.....

Huo Qu Bing sees that my gaze directed at him is growing decidedly chilly so he smiles and squeezes my foot one more time before releasing it and returning to his drinking

without a care in the world.

The song continues but both the dancer and I are flustered and our dancing gets sloppy. Her face is red and my face is burning up, and we accidentally bump into each other while dancing. That startles me back to being alert and I turn and shoot Huo Qu Bing the evil eye. How dare he try to tease me at a time like this? But he continues to look at me with amusement and a wry smile.

The dancer also regains her mental clarity again and resumes her powerfully seductive dancing. I sneak a peek at her, deciding whether I should do something sneaky and injure her otherwise I couldn't possibly out-dance her. But everyone was staring at me, especially with Li Yan here, there was no way I could get away with it.

Ri Chan's melody suddenly stopped, and when it resumed it was a different song. It was a popular love song from the plains that is sung when a man is professing his desire for a woman. The bells on my ankle lose their beat and the dancer also stops for a moment. She turns to look at Ri Chan with a look of surprise and joy, and everyone else looks around in confusion, unsure of what the heck is happening tonight. Did everyone suddenly turn randy or went crazy with lust?

I look at Ri Chan with a questioning look but he ignored me, continuing to look only at the dancer. She stared at Ri Chan and then back towards Huo Qu Bing, and then back at me again. She suddenly made up her mind and with a few quick steps she was standing in front of Ri Chan's seat. She knelt down in front of him, indicating that she had made her choice.

Everything happened so fast that Li Guang Li stood up with look of pure rage but Li Yan quickly chimed in before he could speak "Congratulations to you both!" Li Guang Li looked at his sister's expression and sat down stiffly. This smart dancer changed her mind at the last minute, deciding to gamble her life and her future on Ri Chan. He will not disappoint her. If he is around for one day, then he will take care of her for one day.

I bow towards Hup Qu Bing and turn to return to my seat. Everyone stared dumbly at me when Li Yan laughed "Jin Yu, you randomly went up and danced, and now you're just going back to your seat without an explanation. Where do you think you are right now?"

I exchange a look with Express Wei and we understand each other. Since Li Yan is not giving me an inch and wants to pressure me, then I won't keep backing down. I bow to her and say very clearly "This place is of course the birthday banquet that the Emperor planned for the Empress." Li Yan fumed to hear what I said but she had no response. No matter how much she is loved by the Emperor, she is still the concubine to the Empress being the first wife. She must always bow down to the Empress, so this place isn't up to her to say anything about what just happened.

Liu Che coolly looked around and when he heard what I said, he looked at Empress Wei and then at Huo Qu Bing before laughing "Jin Yu's dance was also quite good, she ought to be rewarded as well." The Empress gently agreed.

A tempest hidden under a passionate dance performance has been averted for now. But what even bigger potential storm will come of this music and dance performance Ri Chan and I put on today? The competition between the Wei family and the Li family is

gradually out in the open. Liu Che may have favored the Li family tonight, it was his way of using his imperial power to even the odds. Just like how he used the Wang family to defeat the Bao family, then then he used the Wei family to defeat the Wang family afterwards. The time has now come for the too powerful Wei family.

The carriage has been traveling for some time but all Huo Qu Bing does is stare at me and smile. When we enter the room, he takes off his robe and keeps smiling nonstop. I'm finally had enough of his smiling "You're not thinking about how to battle Li Yan, instead you're just laughing for no reason. Who knows what tricks she has up her sleeve next."

He let out a long sigh and laid down on the pallet, crossing his hands behind his head, his expression one of contentment "I'm looking forward to her tricks. Hopefully it'll be more of what happened tonight." I huff at him "Yes! In front of an entire court of scholarly and military officials, a few girls vying for your attention is definitely something to be proud of, something to crow about!"

He still had a smile and appeared to be reminiscing "It's definitely worth reliving in my mind. If it wasn't for them, I never would have known that you were nervous about me. And I could have never imagined that you would perform a passion dance for me."

I lifted my head and rolled my eyes, giving him two fake ha ha laughs "I sure am nervous about you!" His lazy attitude is really annoying me so I lean in and wrap my hands around his throat to pretend to strangle him "If you dare to touch inappropriately in public again, I will nervous you to death!"

His one hand reached out to tickle me and his other hand tucked me into his arms "Do you mean that as long as it's not in public, I can do whatever I want? I can touch you inappropriately? Then I guess I'll go right ahead then."

Qing Wu and Xiang Die had just walked in with the night wash when they saw us entwined together in a very passionate embrace. Xiang Die dropped everything she was holding while Qing Wu actually managed to keep her cool and just bowed low and apologized before pulling Xiang Die and running out of the room.

Oh my god! I'm done for! I'm so embarrassed, how can I face them tomorrow? I glare at Huo Qu Bing but all he does is release the bed curtains with one sweep of his hand.

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Who is the rabbit and who is the tiger, which is the one who is going to eat the other, I finally figured it out!

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 2 - Chapter

15

Chapter 31: Deployment

Myabe because it is the Winter and it's cold outside, but I've suddenly turned lazy and always eating. Sometimes I think of a delicious food and I can't sleep at night wanting to eat it. Huo Qu Bing orders the kitchen to add a talented night shift chef so that I can eat anything I want during the night.

Even though he offered to keep me company if I'm bored eating by myself, but during the day he has to train the army and then attend court, so I don't want to make him even more tired. I quietly sneak out to eat and then slip back when I'm done. He's used to me moving next to him when I sleep, so when I leave I try to be fleet and he almost never notices. But when I return, because it's so cold outside and my body is still chilly when I slip under the warm blankets, he always drowsily pulls me into his warm embrace despite the fact that I try to avoid making him cold with my cold body. His every move is unconsciously done, and that makes me feel a heart full of warmth.

Huo Qu Bing said he would give me time, and he stops doing or saying anything intended to gauge my feelings. Sometimes when I'm zoning off, he would never be like before and get angry or try to test me, but instead he would walk away and gave me privacy and space to work things out by myself.

In the past when I was feeling sad, I would lament the Heavens for never taking care of me. I was abandoned by my parents at birth, which isn't that bad since I never had them so I can't say I ever lost them. But then I met Papa, and right when I'm being pampered and cared for, turning into a real person and loving him back, the Heavens take my Papa away in the blink of an eye. My childhood playmate died, and the person I admired and revered caused my Papa to kill himself. It was impossibly cruel.

I endured a lot of wandering in the endless yellow sand of the vast desert but it was not hard. What was hard was coming to Chang An and discovering the first blush of love of a young girl's heart. If the meeting by the Yue Ya Spring was just a random encounter, then reuniting in Chang An felt like Heaven was deliberately playing a trick on me. I asked myself many times during that period – why did fate let us meet, but then turned all my longing into emptiness? I felt like the Heavens were tormenting me for their own sport.

But now, laying in Huo Qu Bing's embrace, watching him sleep, I think to myself that the Heavens gave him to me. I know now that Heaven does care about me. Even though there is this and that between us, even though he cannot marry me.

I grab his hand, and even though he is sleeping, he subconsciously grabbed my hand back.

I pick up his hand and kiss it. If our hands are tightly holding each other's, then there is nothing we can't overcome. Not Xi Yu, not Chang An. Whether it is the battlefield or the Palace, not even if it's life or death.

Huo Qu Bing already attended court and has returned, but I am still snuggled under the covers. He tapped me on the forehead and sighed "When I was in the army base, I heard the old-timers talk about how a woman changes after she's married so she's like two completely different people. I didn't believe then, but seeing you these days, I've come to accept that truth. The sun has already turned towards the West and you still haven't woken up. Aren't you hungry?"

I curl under the blankets and don't move "I ate something earlier but then I felt lazy again and I don't feel like moving." He stuck his hand into the blanket and I try to avoid his icy paw. He tried to ice me again so I quickly sit up. He grabs some clothes for me "Get up! Yi Ping Ju has introduced new dishes and Zhao Puo Nu says it's very tasty. Let's go try it out." I swallowed and immediately got my energy up. He looked at me and shook his head "Is there anything else in your brain these days other than eating?"

I cock my head and think, giving him a sultry and pouty look "There is something else." He smiled and said in a very soft and gentle voice "What is it?" I said in all seriousness "Drinking! The leek soup I had last night was so delicious!" His smile froze and he swatted me on the head, saying in an exasperated tone "Go wash up!"

The moment we step into Yi Ping Ju I see Jiu Ye. He's wearing a blue robe and is as pure as the first snow on a mountain top. He's listening to Tian Cao talk and smiling warmly, though it hides a faint melancholy. The moment he sees me, his eyes flash pain, and my footsteps stop of its own accord. I can't move forward, I can't move back. I turn to look at Huo Qu Bing with a worried expression, and even though he's not looking peachy, he turns to smile warmly at me "If you don't want to eat, we can go home."

His warm smile sweeps away all my lingering shadows and clears my heart. I can't keep using avoidance. I can't keep running away every time I see Jiu Ye, that is not fair to Qu Bing. I smile at Qu Bing "I want to eat" and his grip on my hand tightens once and his eyes light up.

Tian Cao stood up and bowed to Huo Qu Bing while Jiu Ye smiled and welcomed us to sit down with them. Tian Cao asked "Xiao Yu, what do you want to eat?" I laughed "Qu Bing said he was bringing me here to sample new dishes. What are they called?" and I turned to look at Qu Bing. He furrowed his brows "I forgot their names. No matter! Tell them to bring every one of their new dishes out."

I pouted "Do you think I'm a pig! How can I possibly eat all that?" Qu Bing make an exaggerated expression of shock "Seeing your eating "performance" lately, what else do you think I can think about you. Of course you can eat it all. How can you not?" I wrinkled my nose and huffed, turning my face away to ignore him.

I bump into Jiu Ye's dark eyes staring at me with hidden pain. I realize that my usual banter with Qu Bing shows him our intimacy and affection. Unconscious and effortless comfort such as this scene is like a sharp sword that can cut into the heart, and even a flash of this sword's brilliance is enough to hurt him.

A covered dish is brought out and the waiter explains the dish as made with donkey meat to represent the mythical dragon meat, and is a perfect Winter dish. He took off the cover and instead of smelling alluring, it immediately turns my stomach. I rush over to the window and heave. The waiter hurried to give me a handkerchief and some tea, while Huo Qu Bing rubbed my back and looked worried “Where do you feel ill?”

I sip some tea and it makes me feel better “I don’t know, I just suddenly felt like retching.” Jiu Ye sits to the side and has a look of hidden despair in his eyes. He tells the waiter “Take away all the heavy dishes and bring some fresh tea, adding some dried orange peel in it.”

Huo Qu Bing helped me back to the table “Are you feeling better? Do you want to go back and see a doctor?” Jiu Ye stared at me and suddenly said “I’ll listen to your heartbeat.” I looked at Qu Bing who just smiled “I forgot there was a talented doctor sitting right here.”

Jiu Ye put his fingers on my wrist, but his fingertip is colder than ice. He was trying hard to control it, but I can feel the tips of his fingers shaking. He takes a long time to listen to my heartbeat, leaving Huo Qu Bing anxious and asking worriedly “What is it?”

Jiu Yu withdrew his hand and with a smile, a very pained smile, said “Congratulations are in order to General Huo. You’re going to be a father.” Huo Qu Bing sat there stunned for moments, and then he grabbed Jiu Ye’s arm and was in such joyful disbelief “What did you say?” Jiu Ye turned his head and looked out the window. His lips quivered and he was about to answer Huo Qu Bing but his voice was stuck in his throat and he couldn’t get the words out.

Tian Cao pushed Huo Qu Bing away and coldly said “Jiu Ye said General Huo, you are about to become a father.” And then he turned and softly said to Jiu Ye “Jiu Ye, let’s go home.” Jiu Ye was still looking out the window and he lightly nodded his head. Normally he’s so gracious and polite with proper etiquette, but today he’s so shaken that he doesn’t even say farewell or look back before leaving.

Huo Qu Bing just smiles at me with a dumb look of happiness and I also just sit there in a daze. Everything was so sudden, and even though I knew it was bound to happen....in another place, at another time, I would have been so ecstatic that I would be speechless. But today.....I touch my wrist and it still feels cold there. Huo Qu Bing suddenly picked me up and strode to the door. I let out an “ah” and then ask “What are you doing?”

Everyone in Yi Ping Ju falls silent and stares at us. I’m so embarrassed that I bury my face in his chest and wished for hole to open up and swallow me. Huo Qu Bing could care less, or he simply ignores them all. He carries me into the carriage and calls out to the servant “Go to the Palace and summon the best physician.” I grab his arm “No! This is between us and I like it to be discreet. If the physician is summoned, everything will blow up. There are doctors aside from the Palace physicians.”

He stopped the servant and then turned to me “I’m just so happy that I forget to think things through, but.....” He smiled and grabbed my hand “I just want to shout to the world that I’m going to have a son.” His happiness is contagious and I lean on his shoulder and break into a smile. But then I suddenly realize what he said and pinched him “What do you mean? If it’s a daughter you won’t be happy then?”

He quickly shook his head “Happy, I’m happy either way. If it’s a boy, I can teach him to ride, to hunt. I’m happy if it’s a girl, too. A little Yu Er, how could I possibly not adore her? I want girls and boys. Let’s have a few more, and we can make our own football team. Father and sons on the field, I guarantee we’ll cream any other team so that they’ll lose even their pants in the match.”

I stare in shock “Do you think this is a sow dropping a litter?” He looked pleased “If you are willing.” I want to pinch him again, but this person is made of such thick skin. In and out of battles, he doesn’t blink at arrows or swords coming towards him. My little bit of strength is like tickling him. I decide to save my energy so I make a face and close my eyes. He gets nervous immediately “Yu Er, where are you not feeling well?”

I ignore him while resting on his shoulder, so that makes him even more nervous and he hollers outside “Back to the estate immediately!” and then added “But make sure the carriage doesn’t shake too much.” The driver was silent and then politely asked “Does the General want me to go faster or slower. If it’s faster then the carriage will surely shake.”

I can’t hide it any longer and burst out laughing. Huo Qu Bing realized what I did and lightly tapped me on the hand “Now you’ve resorted to these tricks to torment me.” “What can I do? I can’t beat you on brute strength alone, so all I can do is resort to weird tricks.” I smirked “And now I even have a hostage inside me. Let’s see if you’ll dare be mean to me from now on.”

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I don’t know how other women are like when they are pregnant, but other than dislike for smelling very pungent scented foods, everything else is normal with me. In the early months I would get lazy, but now I’m back to normal. I sleep well, I eat well, and if it wasn’t for Qu Bing’s stern eagle eye always trained on me reminding me that I wasn’t just taking care of myself, I probably could say that I was also playing well.

When I walk up to the swing I hear Qu Bing calling behind me “Yu Er.” I can only turn around and walk away. Finally a day dawns with bright sunlight during this Winter season and I ask him if we can go riding outside the city. He immediately answers “Don’t forget your state right now.” My state? All I’ve got is an extra little person inside of me. What’s such a big deal about that? And I’m even showing at all yet.

According to Hong Gu, a woman needs to turn a blind eye to her man, because if she spends her entire time keeping tabs on him, the end result won’t be the man staying by her side forever. She’ll just drive the man to find another place to go where he’s not being kept track of. But what about if a man constantly keeps track of a woman? Hong Gu was silent for a long time after I asked her, and then she said a woman needs to be thrilled about that, because it means he doesn’t want to even look at another woman. I was very upset to hear this. Not fair, so not fair!

At night I told Qu Bing the advice Hong Gu gave me, but I changed the genders around “A man needs to learn to turn a blind eye to a woman and stop keeping track of her all the time. If he keeps staring at her, the end result is.....” I tried to indicate what he needed to do so he can re-assess the way he’s been behaving lately. He was reading a Xiong Nu map at his desk, and after he listened to what I said, he calmly replied “No one wants to die, and I will never give you the opportunity.”

I humph at him and look left and right, front and back, walked inside and outside the room, walked outside and inside the room, and there still remains nothing that I can do within his allowance parameters. He sighed and looked at me “Are you that bored?”

I pouted pitifully and nodded my head “All the maids have been lectured by Uncle Chen already and no one will play with me. In the past we could kick a shuttlecock, swing on the swings, play hide-and-seek, duck-duck-goose, tag, or you’ll take me out to hunt in the mountains. But now I can’t do anything. And I can’t even read a book, the midwife said reading during pregnancy harms the body. They also won’t let me embroider. So what am I to do?”

He looked concerned “It does sound like you can’t do anything. How did all the pregnant women survive this ordeal?” I explain “That midwife you hired says that a pregnant woman must only do one thing, which is to eat more and rest more to make the stomach bigger and then have a fat baby.” I hold my hands out in front of my stomach and mimic a large ball.

He laughed out loud and gestured me over. He sat me down on his lap “I didn’t know you were this bored. I’ll spend more time with you in the future. Yes.....” he thought for a moment “What about this! You’ve read a lot of military manuals, whereas I’ve read very few. Why don’t we play war on a sand board? We’ll each take a side and wage war against each other.”

My annoyance dissipated promptly and I clapped my hands “That’s not exciting enough. Let’s bet on it.” His chin was resting on my forehead and he murmured “Whatever you want. How much money do you have after you sold the businesses? You better not cry if you lost it all.”

I smile “Don’t think that just because the Xiong Nu think of you as an undefeatable warrior god that you will surely beat me. The Xiong Nu don’t know you like I do. Plus if we use the Xiong Nu territories as our battlefield, I’m more familiar with the area and the climate, you’ll be totally outclassed. And finally, think of the great generals who are good on paper but can’t actually fight on the battlefield.”

He turned serious and accepted that I had a good point. He put my hands in his hands and whispered in my ear “In this entire world, you are the only person I have never intended to guard against. In fact, I wanted you to walk into my heart. It sounds weird since I’ve grown up in and out of the Palace and I’m actually a very wary person. But I just knew you were someone that was worthy of me using my real heart in exchange for yours. And my instinct wasn’t wrong on this.”

My nose turned achy and I kissed his cheek and leaned on his shoulder for some time before smiling “I think you’re engaging in mind games with me already to gain an advantage. You want to weaken my defenses from the get to so that I will go easy on you.” He laughed “What about you? Aren’t you already plotting your move and setting the stage for failure. If you lose you can say you were just letting me win.”

Us two wily foxes smiled at each other with candor and excitement. I took out a handkerchief and wrote down the bet. Qu Bing took a look and happily doubled down next to my bet.

The central Xiong Nu forces may have retreated to the desert North region, but they have not given up on attacking the Han border territories. At the end of Winter, the Xiong Nu forces attacked the Ding Xiang and Yo Bei regions and killed over a thousand Han citizens. Liu Che deliberated carefully and decided to send out a large armed force to eradicate the Xiong Nu for good.

Huo Qu Bing becomes even busier, but no matter how busy he is, he always tries to find time to keep me company. If it is matters that can be handled at the estate, he will work at home. His subordinates become regular visitors to the estate.

I'm not yet showing, and other than a few trustworthy maids and a midwife, no one knows I'm expecting. It's nearing New Year again, and because Qu Bing knows he has other things to celebrate such as my pregnancy, he orders the estate to be especially decked out this year. Everyone's been greatly rewarded and the entire estate hums with a festive air. The servants are hustling to decorate the estate and their coming and goings lend a very busy mood all around.

My sand battles with Huo Qu Bing are also lots of fun. I said back then that I knew him quite well, but I forgot that he also knew me quite well. I ended up not gaining any advantage on that, losing seven or eight matches to him out of ten. If we really were on the battlefield, coupled with his power, he'd likely win every round.

Later I thought about it and decided to stop thinking like myself, and put myself in Yi Zhi Xie's shoes. I study every move and consider how Yi Zhi Xie would respond. Plus my familiarity with the region and the climate, I use methods to winnow down Huo Qu Bing's forces, which ends up earning his praise.

The two of us use the sand board to travel thousands of miles and fight over the entire Xiong Nu territory. The Han drawn maps aren't always accurate, and after every battle I will tell Qu Bing where to correct it. He's a fast learner and always asking for clarification and confirmation. He keeps asking me over and over about the people and the climate until he's completely familiar.

To outsiders watching Huo Qu Bing's string of victories, they have no clue how hard he works behind the scenes. From Li Guang to Gong Xun Aou, they constantly get lost in the desert. For a Chang An born Han person to become familiar with the Xi Yu kingdoms and the Xiong Nu territory requires an incredible amount of hard work.

Huo Qu Bing accompanies me to watch the servants hang up the red lanterns. I casually wonder "It appears you've lost the entire estate to me. Maybe we ought to change the "Huo" character to a "Jin" character?" He laughingly embraced me tightly and with his chin resting on my shoulder says "Sure! Why don't we go ahead and change the name plate hanging over the front door as well. Change it to Jin Estate. But you've lost most of your money as well, so how can you feed an entire estate full of people?"

All the nearby servants are focused on their tasks with their heads down, each staring intently at one spot. It's like all they are doing is working and they see nothing else. My thick skin has been well-trained by Qu Bing now, and especially in the estate, I'm used to him hugging and kissing me. Whatever this person wants to do, he will never hesitate

because someone is around. I push his hand away and smile “From now on, people will easily recognize if someone is from the Huo Estate.”

He asked why and I turn towards him and cross my eyes “All of them are turning cross-eyed from staring at one spot to avoid looking at us, isn’t that a perfect way to identify them?” He looked around at the servants and then tweaked my nose and kissed me on the eyes “You’d better not turn cross-eyed.”

Chen An Kang and Zhao Puo Nu are laughing as they walk in and happen to see this scene. Chen An Kang knows about Qu Bing and I and his ability to maintain his demeanor is better than Zhao Puo Nu, trying to laugh in an awkward way, whereas Zhao Puo Nu just stares at his feet. I see his discomfort and even my little bit of awkwardness goes away. I mutter “Here comes another cross-eyed person.” and then bow to them before walking away with a laugh. I can hear Qu Bing trying to refrain from busting out laughing as he says to them “They are all waiting in the study, let’s go now.”

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It’s early Summer and already quite hot. The entire Han court is angling to confront the Xiong Nu, and all military warriors from young and old alike want to take part in what will be the largest and furthest deployment of armed forces in the history of the Han dynasty. This will be for the glory of the entire Han Empire, and a way to leave their names in the annals of history.

Liu Che decides to deploy three hundred thousand troops to go deep into Xiong Nu territory to confront the Shan Yu and the Left Sage King’s troops directly. He names as the lead Generals Wei Qing and Huo Qu Bing, who are each taking fifty thousand troops and splitting into two routes into Xiong Nu territory. To ensure success, Wei Qing takes his most trusted subordinates, and older group of generals who have battled with him many times. Huo Qu Bing also chooses his own team of younger leaders. Li Gan begged to follow his father and accompany Wei Qing into battle, but Liu Che did not approve so Li Gan will miss this deployment.

After Huo Qu Bing heard about this, he asked Liu Che to make Li Gan his Lieutenant General. If something were to happen to Qu Bing in battle, then Li Gan will take over his forces and finish the battle. Huo Qu Bing’s request was completely unexpected not only to Li Gan’s side, it was completely unexpected to me as well.

“Qu Bing, aren’t you afraid Li Gan won’t listen to your orders, or he’ll have any tricks up his sleeve?” The battlefield is already dangerous, and with Li Gan by his side, I worry even more. “Li Gan is battlefield material, it’s a waste not to use him! Our hidden skirmishes in Chang An are one thing, but once he’s on the battlefield facing the Xiong Nu, it’s another thing. Li Gan is a real warrior and this concerns the safety of a nation. He knows what’s important. Yu Er, don’t worry. When have I ever read someone wrong?”

Huo Qu Bing was so confident that after I thought about it, he did make sense. I looked at him and felt an even deeper sense of pride. He complimented Li Gan as a real warrior, but that would make him a warrior among warriors. He is confident and brave to use someone who might be his enemy in politics, and doesn’t worry about Li Gan backstabbing him afterwards once they return to court. If his heart and honor wasn’t even greater than Li Gan’s, how could he understand Li Gan’s point of view, and how could he be willing to

endure Li Gan.

After the hustle of preparation, everything is ready and waiting for deployment. This battle has gathered together Wei Qing, Huo Qu Bing, Gong Xun Aou, Li Guang, Zhao Puo Nu, Lu Buo De and such other extraordinary generals. It could be said as the greatest gathering of military talent in Han history. And the most acclaimed Han scholar official Xi Ma Xiang Ru will be accompanying this deployment, using the might of his pen to record how the shiniest military might in the Han dynasty managed to twinkle in the Xiong Nu sky.

“You’re leaving tomorrow so hurry up and get some sleep!” I kept telling Huo Qu Bing. He was laying with his head on my belly “He moved again.” I smiled “He’s getting more and more mischievous. At night he constantly kicks me awake. Doesn’t he need to sleep?”

He murmured in a low voice “Good son, please don’t torment your mommy, otherwise your daddy I won’t be nice to you. After you come out, you can move around as much as you want.” I push him away and blow the light out “Sleep!” He embraced me and didn’t move for the longest time. I thought he had fallen asleep when he spoke “Yu Er, I’m sorry that I have to leave you all alone in Chang An. This deployment we are going far, and the quickest I can return is three or four months.”

I hold his hand “Don’t worry! Don’t you know my personality by now? How could anyone mistreat me? Plus there is Uncle Chen in the estate and the Empress in the Palace. You go fight your Xiong Nu without worrying about me! Yi Zhi Xie is not that easy to defeat.”

His hand stroked my belly “It’s almost four months now, but how come you’re still barely showing?” I laugh “What’s wrong with that? The doctor says I am barely showing, though soon it’ll pop out.” I stick my head in his chest and grumble “Oh noes! When you come back it’ll be when I’m at my most hideous. I will go hide and not see you until after I have the baby.”

He laughed out loud “I notice you don’t spend time on make up and hair and I thought you didn’t care about these things. Don’t worry, the hot sun in the dry desert, when I return I’ll be as black as an eel. If you don’t find me unattractive, then I won’t find you unattractive.”

He sighed and kissed me “Thank god it’s only four months and I have plenty of time to come back and see his birth. Otherwise I’ll be so anxious it’ll kill me.” I say “Even if you’re back you won’t see his birth. Men aren’t allowed in delivery because they think women would dirty their aura so they always wait outside.”

He scoffed “When your beloved woman is giving birth to your child, what dirty aura could there be. There is only an entire house full of happiness. When I come back I will be sure to stay by your side during the entire experience.”

My heart was warm with love but it also ached. How could I bear to see him go? How could I not want him to stay with me? How could I not worry about him? But love is not about tying the other person down. We were both once lone birds flying in the sky. Now that we are together, it’s not to force each other to fly slower or fly lower, it’s to become the legendary twin birds. We will guide each other to fly higher and accompany each other so that our dreams can come true. So I need to let him leave without any worries, let him know that I can take care of myself and our unborn child.

I waited until the tears in my eyes dried and then I quickly said “Do you think I’ll let you get away with this? I hear child birth is extremely painful, and especially with this one being the first, I will make you watch it all. And if it hurts too much I’ll bite you a few times, so you hurt along with me.” He nodded “Yes. We hurt, then we hurt together. If we’re happy, then we’re happy together.”

I know he’s leaving tomorrow so I pretend to be sleepy and yawn. He quickly said “Let’s go to sleep!” I closed my eyes and waited until I could hear his breathing turn calm and steady. I opened my eyes and stared for a long time at his face, the sharp defined angles of his profile. Qu Bing, you must return without a single scratch on you. You must.

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 2 - Chapter 16

Chapter 32: Poisoned

After sending Huo Qu Bing off in the morning, I move back to Hong Gu's residence. Without him around, I can't stand living at the Huo Estate. I'm a wife yet not a wife, I'm a guest yet not a guest. It's just awkward for me to live there.

With a large estate filled with many residents, there is too much gossiping and I am not in the mood to deal with people's finger pointing. Uncle Chen is very considerate of me and didn't say anything, just ordering some maids, the chef, and some guards to go with me to Hong Gu's place. When I walk in with everyone trailing me, she laughs in surprise.

I walk around the courtyard once and then stretch my back "It really is more comfortable in my own home." Hong Gu softly sighed "What about the Huo Estate?" I smiled "If Qu Bing is there, then that is home. If he's not, then it's not home."

Hong Gu moved some fallen branches in front of me "I don't know whether it's a good thing or a bad thing that you met General Huo." I make a huge smiling face and stick it in front of Hong Gu "See! Do you see this? What is this? I don't want to hear you saying that ever."

Hong Gu quickly laughed "I see it, I see it." She looked at my stomach "I wonder who that child will resemble? Regardless it's bound to be a demon like you two. It will inherit both of your talents at tormenting people. I wonder if it'll go easy on anyone in the future."

When I was in the Huo Estate, the maids couldn't read, but with Hong Gu keeping me company it's much more entertaining. We read, play the zither, play chess, or talk about the gossip in Chang An. My days pass in calm comfort. When conversation strays to the past, I don't have any nostalgia, but Hong Gu does.

She mentions Fang Ru "I thought she wasn't such a cold person, but now when she sees me all she does is avoid me. Sometimes she sees me walking directly towards her and she pretends she doesn't see me." I laugh "Marry a chicken, follow a chicken, marry a dog, follow a dog. Li Yan Nian was already holding a grudge towards me years ago, which was fine when I was still close with Li Yan. Now that we're now longer on good terms, Fang Gu can't disobey her husband's side of the family."

Hong Gu swiftly covered my mouth "Oh my lord! You watch your mouth, how can you still refer to her by her name." I coldly huff "Whether or not I call her Li Yan has no bearing on the way she will behave towards me."

Because I felt sorry for her, I tried to back off. But she keeps pressuring me and our friendship of the past has gradually disappeared. There is still the oath she made me swear. Even though I hold her life in my hands, but I can't do anything about it. Her life isn't important enough to outweigh the potential risk towards Qu Bing and Jiu Ye.

Even though I will keep my promise, but she can never feel at ease about me. In the beginning she just wanted to force me to leave Qu Bing and leave Chang An. But now she likely doesn't even care about my life and death anymore, and the sooner she can get rid of me for good, the sooner she can rest easy. Qu Bing isn't in Chang An right now and I'm pregnant, so my best approach is to avoid her during this time.

But life is just that way. The more you try to avoid something, the more it comes towards you. I want to avoid Li Yan, and she promptly comes to find me. Li Yan sent an invitation order for me to attend her birthday bash in the Palace. No matter how much the Emperor adores her, she's still just a concubine and can't have a banquet where the entire court will fete her. So she's having a small party with just the ladies attending. But it's exactly this type of small gathering that worries me more.

Hong Gu said "This is not a good banquet, how about we ask the Empress to help decline it." I shake my head and give a sad smile while Uncle Chen sighs "Even though it's not clear whether the Empress knows Ms. Yu is pregnant, but the Empress has always taken care of Ms. Yu. Right now the General isn't in Chang An and surely the Empress will not be at ease knowing Ms. Yu is going to the Palace by herself. If she could have declined it she would have. It's clear the Emperor agreed to this so the Empress cannot say anything about it."

I looked at my figure "I'm showing now and I can't hide it anymore. Chances are Li Yan probably heard something so wants to check me out. The doctor said the first trimester is the most risky for a miscarriage, but now it's way past that. At least I got a few months peace and that's good enough for me."

Uncle Chen got on his knees and bowed to me "Ms. Yu, please listen to this old servant and take good care of yourself. No matter what happens, you must endure it for the sake of the child. No matter what insults befall you, you must wait until the General returns."

I don't know if I should laugh or cry "I'm the child's mother, I'm even more nervous than you. I don't need you to remind me. Has my behavior been that rash and impetuous?" Uncle Chen said nothing and I sighed. Just because I did not try to convince Qu Bing to marry a princess, everyone know thinks I'm someone who doesn't see the big picture.

Hong Gu grabbed my hand and smiled to Uncle Chen "Yu Er can sometimes be obstinate and extreme in her ways, but she's not someone who doesn't know what is important." I give Hong Gu an exasperated look. Was she trying to compliment me? If so, she likely made me even more flighty in the eyes of Uncle Chen.

It's the middle of Summer and the trip to the Palace was unbearably hot. Before I even arrive at the party location, a cool breeze blows over and I can hear the sound of rushing water, which immediately invigorates me.

Li Yan knows how to enjoy life. She's ordered a water wheel brought in, and mixed with ice, the water is carried to a high point and pours over a tarp constructed over a bamboo

pavilion. It feels like it's raining and the banquet is situated right in the middle of a blanket of rain. The ice rain chases away the humidity of the Summer and adds a layer of fun to the proceedings. Some ladies are sitting there admiring the flowers, some are playing with the water, and others are eating fruit placed under the rain curtains to keep cool. It really is a comfortable and relaxing event.

The unmarried maidens see my figure and then notice that I have the same hairstyle as them, indicating I am unmarried. They grow curious and keep checking me out. Some of the married ladies look shocked and hurry their daughters away and order them not to look towards me, as if they would also become an unwed mother if they just took one look at me.

Some of the ladies with more grace, or are afraid to be rude to me because of their husbands, give me a small smile or a quick greeting before avoiding me. It's like I have the plague and wherever I go, people immediately disperse.

I scoop some grapes up from under the water to eat. Li Yan ought to be pleased to witness what just happened. But I'm really sorry to her, because if she could see how much I could care less about being snubbed, she'd probably be disappointed again. I grew up in the desert without a lot of modesty, so these kinds of snubs can't hurt me.

In the middle of happily eating, I notice a familiar figure standing alone in the corner. Li Yan must hate this woman who betrayed her, so why was she invited? What was Li Yan planning? I eat my grapes and walk towards her. When she sees me, she looks slightly shy and I hand her some grapes "You look very beautiful wearing the Han style attire."

She bowed towards me "I've heard so much about you from Ri Chan and have been wanting to see you again. But it's not convenient for us to visit. We heard General Huo takes very good care of you, and even the average servant in the Huo Estate doesn't get to meet you. I didn't know it was because you were expecting. When Ri Chan finds out, he'll be so happy."

I smile at her, feeling a twinge of happiness "You call him Ri Chan, he allows you to call him that? Then I ought to call you sister-in-law now." Her cheeks were red but she was proud "You can just call me Wei Ji." "Fine, you can call me Yu Er, or Xiao Yu."

I noticed the jade ring on her finger and my heart shook. I grabbed her hand and stared at it. She asked me "As I was leaving today, Ri Chan took it off his hand and put it on mine. I didn't know why, but now....." this normally aloof girl suddenly grew misty-eyed.

This ring was left for Ri Chan from his grandfather and it's never left his hand since he was a child. He purposely made Wei Ji wear it to this party. He's telling me that he's leaving this lonely girl in a foreign place in my hands. I let go of her hand "He was worried about you."

I rubbed my lower back and Wei Ji quickly asked "Do you want to sit?" There was nowhere to sit since all the good spots were already taken and the few remaining ones are in random spots but doesn't seat two. Wei Ji pointed to a good spot "Let's go over there, I don't want to sit, let's just talk."

I made a face at her and dragged her to the best spot in the pavilion where some ladies were chatting. They immediately turned quiet and looked at me. When I walked right up

to them, they suddenly stood up and gave me a dirty look before walking away.

I smiled at Wei Ji and gave her a victory gesture. I fixed my skirts and blithely sat down. Wei Ji sat down next to me and tried to cover her smile. Those ladies finally figured out what I did and gave me a hateful look. They can't be too obvious so they purpose talk in a low but loud enough voice "I heard she used to run the dancing houses in Chang An! She plies in the male trade, so of course her behavior is without shame."

I turn towards the Madam Jiang and smile "This Madam hasn't heard it all! Don't you know that Consort Li came out of my very own dancing house?" Her face turned ashen white. The dancing houses of Chang An, in the history of this city, the most successful male trade ever conducted was producing a country toppling beauty that is Consort Li. This Madam Jiang wanted to insult me and forgot about this.

My eyes brushed coldly over everyone of them and they had no choice but to lower their heads. Wei Ji whispered "They are afraid of you?" I shook my head "They are all afraid of Qu Bing. And maybe.....Consort Li. You must've heard about Qu Bing's temper. These ladies might be the wives of the scholarly officials, and their husbands don't report to Qu Bing, but right now the Emperor favors the military officials over the scholars. They wouldn't dare use their husband's lives or livelihood as a gamble to get even with me. And I....." I coldly huffed "Today this will surely be a Hong Men Banquet (referring to the famous Xiang Yu/Liu Bang banquet in the Chu-Han Contention). Even if I concede defeat I might not get out alive. Then I should stop laying down and scare these little villains away first."

As we're talking, Li Yan and the Empress arrive hand-in-hand. Followed behind him is Liu Che's newest concubine Yi Jie Shu. Li Yan and the Empress immediately looked at my stomach and then pretended they saw nothing. They both averted their eyes to receive greetings. It was instead Yi Jie Shu who smiled at me and softly said "Congratulations."

Li Yan was very solicitous and yielded to the Empress on everything, whether it was the dance performed or the games played. Empress Wei laughed and demurred "You are the birthday girl today, you decide everything and I am just a guest." After Li Yan, Yi Jie Shu, and a few of the other concubines conferred, they decided to pick flower sticks as the game. Li Yan's maid held all the sticks and all the guest were very into the game to make Li Yan happy. The party became very lively.

Right when everyone was having fun, the Emperor's delivery arrived. On top of a wooden plank was an intricate nine-leveled jade tower carved with a phoenix design. It was already rare to see such a large piece of jade, and paired with the detailed carving, it truly is one of the priceless wonders of the world.

Liu Che must have went out of his way to come up with this extravagant gift and everyone is just stunned by it. Eyes turn towards Li Yan with awe and she just smiled and had the tower placed in the middle of the party so everyone could admire it.

Liu Bo, who was still unsteady on his feet, wobbled up to his mother to present her with a birthday peach. He looked like a little adult person, saying a very proper birthday greeting to his mom while bowing his head. It was all great until he forget his lines in the middle of his speech and end up sucking on his thumb and looking towards the Crown Prince Liu Ju for help. Liu Ju lowered his head and reminded his younger brother, who got even more

nervous with all the eyes trained on him, and end up diving into his older brother's arms to hide his head so none of us could see him.

What a pair of adorable siblings, and I couldn't help myself but laugh. Empress Wei shook her head while Li Yan smiled but her eyes were cold. Her maid immediately took Liu Bo away from Liu Ju. I silently sighed. In the Imperial household, there is no such thing as regular brothers. Even if they are innocent now, their mothers will not allow it.

The flower stick arrived in the hands of Madam Jiang who had run in with us earlier. She plucked a stick and it was read aloud "The holder of the stick can ask anyone at this party to do anything" and then she quickly put the stick back in the can.

Empress Wei looked at Madam Jiang, who acted like she was deep in thought and then turned to look at Wei Ji "I have not been able to forget the dance performance you put on for us, can Madam perform it for us again today?" Even though Wei Ji is of low birth and is not a Han person, but she is still the wife of Sir Guang Lu. There are many dancers here but Madam Jiang specifically asked for Wei Ji in order to insult the scene that day when we fought over Huo Qu Bing, and also to insult Wei Ji even more.

I stare at the person holding the flower sticks and she looked back at me before averting her eyes with some fear. It's clear they still somewhat fear me, but to Wei Ji..... Wei Ji's face was bright red but she slowly regained her composure. She grabbed my hand once and then stood up to dance.

Li Yan smiled at me and then picked up her wine to drink. Empress Wei heard that Madam Jiang wanted Wei Ji to perform and she didn't show any emotion. She just turned her head to converse with Liu Ju. I suddenly remembered this saying, the person who knows you the best is your enemy,

Wei Ji's dance is beautiful and moving, but no one is watching her, purposely ignoring her or ridiculing her. Only Liu Bo was very into it, clapping and struggling out of his nanny's arms so he could stand closer to watch. Wei Ji was turning in her dance when I saw three round jewels roll in front of her from an unknown place. Before I can call out "be careful", she had stepped on the jewels and her body fell backwards. To stop her fall, she reached out and happened to grab the red cloth on the table holding the jade tower. The moment her body hit the floor, the entire jade tower tumbled on the ground and broke into pieces.

Liu Bo saw Wei Ji fall and moved forward to help her. Thank heavens a nearby woman pulled him back quickly, but even then a piece of broken jade glanced over him and drew blood. The nanny started screaming for the royal physician.

It was already a great crime to have broken the jade tower, but to harm a Prince is an even graver crime. Li Yan had her head lowered and relaxed after she saw he was just cut in two small areas. She looked upset still and had tears in her eyes as she berated the nanny and the maids.

I finally released my pent up breath knowing that it was not a serious injury. Thank god, thank god.....but even then.....my heart was nervous. I looked at Wei Ji, and in the commotion, she remained kneeling there in complete calm. Her face was white but she was very composed. She took off her ring and quickly shoved it to me "Wei Ji does not have this good fortune. Please tell Ri Chan that even though I am all alone in a foreign

land, meeting him was a true blessing in my life. He need not miss me.”

Li Yan looked at Wei Ji as she held Liu Bo. She looked down at the broken shards on the ground and said to Empress Wei “Everything will be decided as the Empress sees fit.” Wei Ji betrayed Li Yan so Li Yan must want her dead. What happened today is clearly made out to be Wei Ji’s fault, and the Empress will clearly not overturn the boat with Li Yan over the life of a Xi Yu dancer.

Empress Wei did not look at Wei Ji and said calmly “Everything will be dealt with according to the Palace rules. A Prince was injured, so she will be beaten 100 times with a stick. But since the Emperor’s present was also destroyed, he will decide what to do next.” Li Yan nodded.

100 strokes with a stick! Just this is enough to kill Wei Ji, what else can come after. Li Yan was cooing over Liu Bo but she gave me a taunting look. Auntie Yun was shaking her head at me from behind Empress Wei. When the Empress looked at me, her eyes conveyed warning and a plead as she looked at my stomach.

My hand was gripping Ri Chan’s ring so tightly it hurt. For this baby I must endure this, must endure this.....When Ri Chan gave Wei Ji the ring, he did not know I was pregnant. I need to protect this little person as well. I know he will understand and forgive me. And who could have imagined that Li Yan’s trap could have gone off without a hitch, and even better, a Prince was even accidentally hurt. Even though it was a minor injury, it is a grievous offense.

Wei Ji was dragged out by the guards and she closed her eyes, completely at peace.

I kept telling myself all sorts of reasons not to act, but I kept asking myself. If I let Wei Ji die today, can I go on living at ease? This would make me no different than the underhanded and vicious Li Yan. Years ago I hated the fact that Yi Zhi Xie betrayed his friends, and would this be a type of betrayal by me?

I called out “Wait!” Empress Wei gave me a resigned look and pretended she didn’t hear me. Li Yan smiled and nodded at me: Jin Yu, you didn’t disappoint me, welcome to the trap.

I kneel before the Empress and Li Yan “Wei Ji may be at fault, but she was not the cause of what happened.” I open my hands and a round jewel was resting there. In the confusion I could only grab one jewel, but I know this evidence is flimsy. This jewel is so flimsy that it’s just dragging me down and no one can save me. “When Wei Ji was dancing, I saw a few of these jewels roll under her feet, which caused her to trip.”

Li Yan stared at the jewels and said nothing. Her maid said “The prince and princesses were playing with these jewels for fun, so are you saying.....” She shut her mouth “Your servant I deserve to die.”

Li Yan slapped her across the face and screamed “You worthless servant, how dare you speak such nonsense!” Li Yan looked around “Other than Jin Yu, did anyone else see the jewels roll under Wei Ji’s feet.” Everyone vigorously shook their head,

Li Yan looked at the Empress. Now this won’t get resolved as easily as killing Wei Ji. One jewel injured a prince and the rumors have now pointed fingers at the other princes and

princesses here. Who could be so hateful as to want to destroy the present their royal father gave to Consort Li? And in turn injured their young brother? Empress Wei had a cold smile “We shall investigate fully. Take Wei Ji and lock her up for now.” Li Yan stared at Empress Wei who continued “And take Jin Yu as well.”

With a definitive slam, the door to the prison cell was secured shut. Wei Ji was crying “Xiao Yu, why did you get yourself involved?” I took her hand and placed the ring back on her finger “Since Ri Chan put this ring on himself, you’ll have to give it back to him yourself.”

Wei Ji was calm in the face of death, but now she’s sobbing wildly. I wipe away her tears and look around the prison “It’s better than I had imagined.” Wei Ji stood up and took the hay on the floor and made a thick mat for me to sit on “There is no sun in a prison cell and the floor is too damp.”

I touch my belly and silently think – I’m sorry, your daddy left not long ago and I’ve taken care of you all the way to the inside of a prison cell. I always considered Li Yan an enemy of the Wei family and never thought of her as my enemy. But from this day forward, she and I no longer have a shred of feeling for each other. She constructed one trap within a trap, but who is her ultimate target? Is Li Yan hoping to use this to harm Liu Ju and Empress Wei? If so this is pretty weak. So what is she looking to do? I can’t figure it out right now.

After two days there has been no movement. I’m sure Uncle Chen and Hong Gu have completely lost their bearing and must’ve tried to visit me already. But they haven’t appeared, which means things must be dire.

Our food is already better than what other prisoners get, but compared to the food at the Huo Estate, it’s comparable to slop. I’m not a picky eater and I can eat anything, but this unborn baby has been spoiled by us and since I got pregnant there are foods I can no longer stomach.

Wei Ji gives me the best portions of her food and I do not resist. But even then, I still have no appetite so I force myself to eat more, but then I throw it right back up. Wei Ji nervously looks at me with tears in her eyes. I’m full of worry and hopelessness, but I don’t want Wei Ji to feel bad so I laugh “I don’t know who he resembles, neither Qu Bing nor I are picky eaters. Yet we’ve raised a picky child. Later I’ll have to teach him a lesson.”

The entire prison has only one area that, during noon time, a sliver of sunshine would come in. In the beam of light, a million flecks of dust dance and make a person feel dazed. Am I the dust, or the dust me, or the entire world is just a fleck of dust?

A pair of thin boots, a form-fitting white robe, with the sunlight behind him, it illuminates him in a halo of golden light. He looks like an illusion that will blow away with the wind. But that smile as warm as the sun feels so completely real it hits me right in the heart. In the dank and cold prison cell, his appearance turned everything warm and bright. I can’t believe it so I close my eyes, but when I open he’s still standing in the sunlight.

Jiu Ye looked at me, his eyes full of worry and fear. He reached his hand to me and without a word I knew he wanted to take my pulse. He needs to immediately make sure

I'm fine before he can relax. I wordlessly give him my wrist and his expression turns misty. I want to take my wrist back but he grabs it, grabs it so hard my wrist actually hurts.

He's still smiling but in the corner of his eyes I see shades of exhaustion. It looks like it was harder on him than me, the person in this prison cell. I feel all these indescribable feelings and after a moment I say "I didn't endure any hardship." He slowly released my hand "Madam Chen wouldn't let anyone inform General Huo. Do you want me to notify him?"

I shake my head "He can't be distracted on the battlefield. This battle is against the Shan Yu of the Xiong Nu, and it's his dream since childhood. If he doesn't give it his all during this battle, it will become one of his life's greatest regrets. Plus I was in the prison for just a few days, no big deal. Oh right, why are you here?"

He smiled wanly "The Emperor can be considered my uncle, so this favor wasn't too hard." He was very casual about it, but the difficulties inherent is clear. I don't know what sacrifice he made, what promises he gave Liu Che. With his personality, he'll carry the entire burden all by himself. No matter how I ask he will never tell me. It's best if I act like I believe him, at least that will not let his efforts go to waste.

"Yu Er, what happened. Tell me so I can decide how best to handle it." I quietly think and then tell him everything, from my relationship with the Xiong Nu, my friendship with Ri Chan, and the fact that Li Yan must've guessed that Ri Chan and I are not casual acquaintances. She used Wei Ji to seamlessly entrap me into her web.

Jiu Ye listened to what I said and his eyebrows furrowed "There is something else you're not telling me. Everyone in court knows that General Huo and General Wei, even though they are relatives, their relationship is precarious. With the Emperor's favor, subordinates of General Huo often band together to belittle subordinates of General Wei. If Consort Li wanted the Crown Prince position and to oppose the Wei family, she shouldn't be upsetting General Huo. She ought to be using the two generals' shaky relationship and try to win General Huo to her side. Why would she keep targeting you? And this time even the princes and princesses are involved. That means she wants you....." Jiu Ye did want not to say those words of ill-tidings in the same sentence as me, so he let his words trail off.

I smiled at him "I really can't keep anything from you." I tried to sound casual to try to lighten the mood, but it didn't work and Jiu Ye just stared at me "I do have some personal conflicts with Li Yan, but I can't reveal it. The fact that she hates me this much is also a surprise to me." Jiu Ye nodded and didn't press further. He thought and asked "The critical factor is who released the jewels. Or to find someone who dropped some jewels. Madam Jiang may have started it all, but she's just a clueless person. Chances are she knows nothing, so we need to find that palace maid to ask."

"That's also what I was thinking. She put that flower stick back in the jar so quickly I was already suspicious that she made up the rule. But since Li Yan tasked her with doing this, that means Li Yan trusts her implicitly. And if she's under Li Yan's protection, it will be hard to question her and find out anything of value."

Jiu Ye smiled, different than before, it was cold "Why ask her, all we need is for Li Yan to decide to sacrifice her." I thought about it, understanding what he means, but unsure of

how Jiu Ye can make Li Yan agree to back off. There was a sound of metal banging outside and Jiu Ye looked torn and loathe to leave “I have to go. Please endure for two or three more days.”

Since Jiu Ye walked in, Wei Ji hid in the corner but she kept sneaking glances at him. When she heard he was leaving, she suddenly rushed up and bowed three times to him. Jiu Ye looked at her with shock and he had no time other than to bow back “I will bother the Madam to please take care of Yu Er.” Wei Ji avoided Jiu Ye’s bow and quickly nodded her head.

Jiu Ye’s departure took away the only sunlight in the prison, but he had already left the sunlight on my heart. Wei Ji still looked dazed so I asked her “Do you know Jiu Ye?”

She nodded her head, and then shook her head “I’ve seen him. So you Han people call him Jiu Ye? Not a lot of people have seen him before, but we all envision that he’s someone with a heart as wide as the sky. We Xi Yu people call him “Shi Nan Tian” Xi Yu is drier than the central plains and not a lot of medicinal plants can grow there. Han people always love to sell it at exorbitant prices to us. But Shi Nan Tian opened medicinal plant shops all over Xi Yu, and the prices are the same as in the Han dynasty. When there is an pandemic outbreak because of the war, his shops always give free medicine to homeless people. Before I was selected as a dancer, I saw him once treating a little beggar on the street. That day he wore all white, as spotless as the snow on the highest mountain peak. But that little beggar was covered in smelly boils yet he still held him in his lap. His every gesture was gentle and careful, as if he was afraid that child would hurt, as if he was holding the most precious gem in his arms. Later in the Palace of the Gui Su kingdom, I saw him again. The prince had just tested a new bow and was so excited, wanting to embrace him. It was a priceless gesture people only dream about, but he made no move. Even though he smiled, I can feel his heart was cold and did not want it. I overheard them talking, and thought to myself that he must be the legendary “Shi Nan Tian”, for who else in this world has a heart like his. Even though he is handicapped, but his voice and his form makes you believe that he is more lofty than anyone in this world. Every time I see him, he is smiling, but I feel like he’s carrying an enormous burden. So my biggest respect is not to disturb him. He stayed in the palace for three days and I just observed him from a distance for three days. Everyday I prayed to the Heavens, asking that one day he can live an ordinary life. I cannot imagine that I would see him again today, and in such an unexpected place.”

Wei Ji smiled but it was one full of sadness. “Seeing “Shi Nan Tian” today was wonderful. He has anger, has rage, has true happiness. He doesn’t seem as lonely.....but he....he appears to be so sad.”

I silently turned my head away and stared at a random spot. I don’t know what I’m looking at, I just want to avoid Wei Ji’s questioning look. Shi Nan Tian (the sky which eases suffering), he’s easing other people’s suffering, but who will ease his suffering?

Since Jiu Ye arrived, our accommodations have improved. The food tastes better and we even get a bottle of milk after dinner. Because I’m so picky and the things I can’t eat make me throw up, Wei Ji always let me eat whatever I can keep down, so the two of us switch up our meals that way and I’m full enough. In the darkness Wei Ji softly says “Tomorrow we will be able to leave.”

I murmur my concurrence. Wei Ji trusts Jiu Ye implicitly. She doesn't care about all the details, she just believes what Jiu Ye said to me about enduring for only two or three more days.

In the middle of the night, I break into a cold sweat and wake up from my sleep due to sharp pain. I want to call out for Wei Ji but I can't make a sound. My body is alternatively hot or cold and I can't exert any strength, only shivering. Thank god Wei Ji is a light sleeper and my shaking awakens her. She takes one look at me and is so frightened that she starts to cry. She screams out for someone to come.

I see her reaction and I know something is very wrong. Wei Ji is a very calm and level headed person, so for her to lose her composure like this, the way I look is probably half foot in the grave right now.

Wei Ji calls for some time but there is no response. She takes off her outer robe and covers me with it. My body hurts so much it feels like it's splintering into small pieces, and all I want to do is vaporize so I can avoid this torturous pain. My consciousness slowly drifts into darkness.

No, I can't fall asleep. If I sleep there might be no more pain, but someone will be devastated. I promised Qu Bing that I would take care of myself....and the baby. My mind snapped back into focus and I used my last bit of conscious thought to bite down hard on my tongue. The blood in my mouth awakens me a bit.

This pain came out of nowhere, it's not an illness, but more like poison. I can't talk and can only use my eyes to communicate with Wei Ji. She really is very smart and when she sees me eyeing the jar she brings it over. She props me up and feeds me the milk. The taste of the milk mixed with the blood in my mouth goes down my throat and it tastes disgusting but I force myself to drink it all. Every gulp might increase my chances of surviving.

Wei Ji holds me and keeps crying "Xiao Yu, if someone has to die it ought to be me. I was the one who betrayed Consort Li and then broke the jade tower. Why am I fine....." She suddenly realizing something and her face was regret and fear "We switched our food so you have ingested poison meant for two people."

My entire mouth was bloody and even if I bit my tongue again I cannot stay awake. With the sound of Wei Ji's sobbing and pleading, I slowly drift into a darkened world.

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 2 - Chapter

17

Chapter 33: Deadly Plot

It felt like I was sleeping on clouds, light and airy, an indescribable feeling of comfort. I want to keep sleeping like this, but the tiny speck of alertness in my mind was telling me to wake up. I have to wake up no matter what. I felt like I had been split into two, one person laying in the clouds wanting to sleep, the other person watching the sleeping me and telling me to wake up. But the sleeping me wasn't reacting, only getting more tired, so tired that I could tumble from the sky at any moment and smash into pieces.

My consciousness was starting to splinter, but the me in the sky was still struggling and calling "Jin Yu, you must wake up, you have to wake up. You can do this, so use all your strength to open your eyes. Use your strength, use your strength and you can wake up. You can do it....."

I can do it, I must do it. Someone is waiting for me! My eyes were as heavy as lead but I still did the most difficult task of opening my eyes. Jiu Ye stared at me with unbridled joy, unshed tears shining in his eyes. He pulled me into his arms "Yu Er, I knew you would wake up."

Wei Ji smiled even as she was crying "Thank goodness Jiu Ye refused to wait until the morning to get you out. The moment he resolved the case, even in the middle of the night he asked the Emperor to release you. Otherwise even if I died one hundred times I wouldn't be able to pay back my debt."

Ri Chan silently watched me with a slight smile, but his eyes were also misty. Xiao Feng pointed at me "You women are such trouble, you only cause people to worry!" His voice appeared to catch in his throat and he turned and left the room. Looks like I really did take a turn to Hell and back, such that even with Jiu Ye's unparalleled medical skills wasn't even able to guarantee that I would survive. My hands touched my stomach and I relaxed knowing he was safe.

Jiu Ye's eyes are bloodshot and he looked uncharacteristically worn down. The normally elegant him was dressed in a wrinkled robe that looked like he hadn't changed it in some time. I wanted to say "thank you", but I know it's not necessary. Those two words are too insignificant, and what I really feel inside, I don't want him to know. So many things are best kept deep down in the deepest reaches of the heart, and saying it out loud will only impart more pain.

My parched throat asked "Is everything over?" Jiu Ye stared at me without blinking, appearing not to be listening to me. I was afraid to look at him and turned towards Ri

Chan, who quickly answered “You’ve been unconscious for four days and nights, even the most earth shattering matter ought to have been resolved.” Ri Chan calmly explained “The jewel was a serving girl’s purposeful act at the banquet, she worked for the newly designated Yi Jie Shu, who wanted to use the opportunity to turn Empress Wei and Consort Li against each other so she could reap the benefits. Once this was all revealed, the serving girl killed herself, and Yi Jie Shu was stripped of her title and sent to the Cold Palace.”

Li Yan may not have toppled Empress Wei, but she managed to get rid of another rival. Yi Jie Shu, that girl with the bright healthy smile, so different than Li Yan’s helpless beauty. She just received the Emperor’s favor and so soon she has been sacrificed under two warring powers and now sent to the Cold Palace.

My heart shook and I chastised myself for even having the time to think about someone else’s problem. Wasn’t I supposed to be smart? If it wasn’t for Jiu Ye, I would be six feet under now. I can no longer underestimate Li Yan, and I can’t be soft hearted towards her anymore. Otherwise I will only hurt myself and let my enemies smile and my loved ones weep. “Was I poisoned?”

Jiu Ye didn’t answer me, and when I turned around I saw in shock that he had actually fallen asleep while half laying on the pallet. Wei Ji looked at me “For the last four days and nights, Jiu Ye has been keeping vigil next to you and never once closed his eyes despite our trying to get him to rest.” I looked at Jiu Ye’s exhausted face and my heart’s hurt was hard to describe.

Xiao Feng was worried and I quickly said “Don’t move Jiu Ye, let him sleep here! Move me to the other pallet.” Wei Ji and Xiao Feng helped Jiu Ye take off his shoes and laid his head on a pillow. They placed a bowl of ice near his feet to ward off the heat. As Wei Ji turned to leave, Jiu Ye pulled her skirt while he was still asleep, calling out “Yu Er.....” Everyone in the room turned to look at me, and then quickly averted their eyes.

Wei Ji wanted to pull her skirt out but Jiu Ye refused to let go. His forehead was furrowed in distress and everyone seeing it felt despondent. Xiao Feng wanted to help but Wei Ji stopped him “Let Jiu Ye grab onto it! At least he’ll rest better in his dreams.” Ri Chan softly sighed and handed a pair of scissors to Wei Ji, who cut her skirt where he was grabbing it. Jiu Ye’s hand relaxed while holding the skirt and his face eased. I laid my head on the pillow while my heart just ached.

Ri Chan understood somewhat and sat next to me, patting me on the shoulder “Weren’t you asking about being poisoned?” I took a deep breath and gathered my thoughts. Things are what they are today and I cannot hope to resolve things amicably with Li Yan. And now I’ve dragged Jiu Ye back into the muck of Chang An, despite him having almost extricated himself. This is also the deepest cesspool in Chang An – the fight for imperial succession. I have to get myself together no matter who is involved.

Ri Chan saw me listening and continued “These past few days Jiu Ye was busy saving you so he didn’t pay attention to anything else. Others asked who poisoned you but Jiu Ye wouldn’t answer. I think it’s Consort Li, and by now the Emperor must know you were poisoned because all the rare and precious medicines from the Palace have been delivered non stop. Even though it wasn’t specified for what use, with everyone pretending nothing

happened, but it's clear the Emperor is worried. And....”

If something happened, it would be one corpse and two lives. The Emperor can seal all information but Jiu Ye would be able to let Huo Qu Bing know. With his temper, and having control of the military, of course the Emperor is worried. When I think about this, I suddenly realize that Li Yan is not doing this as a personal vendetta. Her end game is still the entire Han Empire. Despite Huo Qu Bing and Wei Qing not always getting along, they are still relatives. If she succeeded this time, the Han court would descend into chaos. Even if Liu Che could control the fury, he would be exhausted by it and have no time or attention to pay to Xi Yu.

Wei Ji quickly came over to wipe my sweat “Talk about this later! First get better.” I replied “I got my life back and I’m more nervous about myself than anyone is. It’s no problem to talk about this, and it’s better to figure it out. If I know what’s going on, I can rest better. Otherwise I’ll be worried about where the next attempt will come and can’t rest soundly.”

Ri Chan said “The key is that Consort Li and your relationship has always been good, and most people still think you are as close as sisters. General Huo and the Wei family isn’t that aligned politically. Even if he has equal military power as General Wei, even if Consort Li wanted her son on the throne, she ought not go as far as eliminate you and use that to enrage General Huo. With Consort Li so beloved right now, unless there was ironclad proof, the Emperor will never believe it. He might even suspect that the Wei family was behind this in order to lessen the growing power of the Li family. So now the Emperor doesn’t want to get to the bottom of your poisoning.”

I sigh “If Li Yan dared to do it, she would have prepared a get away plan and people ready to take the fall for her. If we’re not careful, innocent people might be sacrificed. Since it’s over with, I don’t want to bother with it. How did Jiu Ye get Li Yan to back down on the smashing of the jade tower that injured the prince?” Ri Chan shook his head “All I know is Jiu Ye spoke with the Emperor once, but only they know what the content of the discussion was. Afterwards the Emperor ordered Jiu Ye to investigate this matter. Maybe Consort Li thought it was too hard to topple Empress Wei with this, plus now Jiu Ye with his unknown resources are involved. Rather than make this more complicated, why not sacrifice a pawn and use it to topple someone becoming more dangerous to her.”

I humph once “She didn’t give up. She’s got more up her sleeve, and each new tactic is more deadly and vicious than the last. She’s pretending to let this go, and even left it to Empress Wei to punish Yi Jie Shu. In the future if the Emperor ever remembered Yi Jie Shu fondly, he’ll place the blame on Empress Wei for having her cast out.” Ri Chan and Wei Ji both looked shocked and afraid “From the beginning it was a trap within a trap, so thorough and calculated.” I said to Ri Chan “I’m sorry to you. You could have lived comfortably in the Han dynasty, but now I’ve embroiled you in this court intrigue.”

Ri Chan held Wei Ji’s hand and smiled “In this lifetime it’s hard enough to find true friends, and if we live an exciting life, then it was all worth it. If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t have met such amazing men like General Huo and Jiu Ye, such loyal friends like Tian Cao and Xiao Feng. If you asked me, I’m willing to do this again.”

Wei Ji also smiled “I’m also willing. Stories talk about willing to die for one promise and I

never believed it until I met you and Ri Chan. Forget one promise, I'm willing to die for one ring." Xiao Feng piped up "I'm not willing. Little ole me just wants to run my business. Your crappy mess, don't bother me again with it."

Wei Ji wrinkled her nose and cocked her head, asking in a playful voice "Who was the first person to drop everything and hold vigil here day and night. Who was the person hollering that he would go slay Consort Li to avenge his big sister Yu. Who was the one who started crying first the moment Xiao Yu woke up?"

Xiao Feng had already hopped outside "I was like that because of Jiu Ye, and because of my grandpa." Everyone looking at him started to laugh, and I felt a sense of warmth. All the darkness caused by Li Yan's plot vanished. With friends such as these, I have no regrets.

.....

Jiu Ye wanted me to stay at the Shi Estate, and even Tian Cao, Ri Chan, and Hong Gu all begged me to stay there. Initially Uncle Chen was not sure, but when Jiu Ye asked "Can you guarantee that everyone at the Huo Estate is trustworthy?" then Uncle Chen slowly sighed and bowed to Jiu Ye "It's all this old servant's fault. When the General returns, he will personally go to thank you for taking care of Ms. Yu."

Jiu Ye's tightly gripped hand on his wheelchair relaxed and he smiled and bowed to Uncle Chen. Tian Cao angrily huffed "Xiao Yu lived here when she first arrived in Chang An. We are old friends, the General doesn't need to thank us." Uncle Chen achieved his purpose and pretended not to hear what Tian Cao said. He said a few words to me and then turned and left.

Ri Chan looked like he was laughing and crying, while Wei Ji looked angry. I can only shake my head. Whether it's Jiu Ye or Qu Bing, if a woman met either of those men and they loved her, it would be a lifetime's blessing. But when these two huge blessings are added together, somehow it's not one plus one equals two, doubling in happiness. It's so precarious that one misstep and all three of us will be crushed.

Returning once again to the Bamboo Residence, the bamboos are still green, the white pigeons are still flying, but everything else has completely changed. I hide all my regrets in my heart, and Jiu Ye also tried his best to keep all his feelings hidden. On the surface he has his usual winsome smile.

Sometimes I will accidentally turn my head or shift my eyes and it will meet his eyes. In the dark depths swirled waves of emotion, heartache and pain blended together, which he brushed aside with a smile. Jiu Ye rigidly controlled my diet, my daily routine, until by the end of the month I was fully recovered. I kept asking him what he discussed with Liu Che or what promised he made to Liu Che, but he always just smiled and refused to answer.

Since I was "ill", Liu Che sent royal physicians and medicines, and the Empress also sent someone to check on me. The most ironic thing was Li Yan sending someone to check on me, and even sending me letters on how to take care of my unborn baby. Her words were all care and worry for me. If Liu Che read this he would be so touched that Li Yan was such an emotional person, and that we were still close sisters! Every time Xiao Feng saw one of Li Yan's servants he would be furious and looked like he wanted to stab someone,

and he only backed down when Jiu Ye shot him a look,

After her servant would leave, Xiao Feng would hop around me and rail at her, about how even businessmen aren't as devious as her. He gets angry that we are so politely and smiling towards Li Yan's people. Tian Cao tried to call Xiao Feng down to no avail, so he just let him vent. Once Jiu Ye heard it, he shot Xiao Feng a long look, which actually gave Xiao Feng goosebumps. Xiao Feng rubbed his goosebumps and calmed down. It was rare to see that crab accept defeat and I just smile and fan myself.

Jiu Ye lightly said to Xiao Feng "From now on you are in charge of anyone sent by Consort Li. If you mistreat them even one bit, you might as well leave Chang An and go be Jing Yen and Sheng Xing's guy from now on." Xiao Feng lowered his head and stood in one spot for two hours, not even listening to either Tian Cao or myself when we try to console him.

After one night, Xiao Feng's expression changed a bit, and Tian Cao said to Jiu Ye "We can rest assured now and hand everything in Chang An to him in the future. He's older than Xiao Dian and Xiao Lei, and to be the boss in Chang An he needs to learn to be fake and conciliatory when necessary." This is true, but Jiu Ye didn't seem happy, appearing worried that Xiao Feng will go too overboard with this as well. But Jiu Ye wasn't able to think of a good way to explain this to Xiao Feng.

Since I'm all better, I decide to pay a visit to the Palace to thank them for their consideration of me during my illness. Jiu Ye immediately said "No." I furrow my brows and use the same tone of voice with him that he used with Xiao Feng "One needs to learn to be fake and conciliatory when necessary." Jiu Ye was so frustrated his eyes were filled with laughter as he stared at me. It's rare Jiu Ye is pushed into submission. Tian Cao was drinking tea and spit it out, choking on the water. The formerly somber Xiao Feng peeked at me and then at Jiu Ye's weird expression and then burst out laughing.

Jiu Ye looked at Xiao Feng and said with a smile "Behavior can be fake, but your heart must be real. Many rich people in Chang An end up with nothing. They were not making money to use money, they got lost in the money. You must retain your true heart no matter what experiences you go through." Xiao Feng looked stunned for a moment before smiling "I understand now." Tian Cao finally knew why I pretended to be Jiu Ye to goad him. He looked at me, he looked at Jiu Ye, and then he softly sighed.

"Jiu Ye, I know you are worried, but these things I have to face by myself. According to etiquette I need to enter the Palace to thank them for their supposed concern for me. Even if.....even if I am no longer alone, and I am tightly connected to them now." Jiu Ye was silent while Tian Cao left the room quietly.

"Don't eat or drink anything in the Palace, whether at Consort Li or the Empress's residence. Leave as soon as you can. If anything happens go find the Emperor, right now he's the most trustworthy person there. The Emperor promised me..... Because of me and General Huo, the Emperor will protect you." I was filled with a lot of anxiety and questions but now is not the time to ask it, so I just agree.

When I enter the Palace I first head to thank the Emperor. Liu Che was in his study reading official documents. He didn't summon me inside, just speaking to me through the door and then sending me along. Everything was normal, related to my recovery, but one

question appeared out of the blue. He asked “How many more months until the baby is born?” I thought about it but couldn’t find out a reason he wanted to know. Maybe he wanted to check that Qu Bing would be able to come back in time for the birth.

I ought to visit the Empress first, but for my own safety, I head to visit Consort Li. That way if Consort Li wanted to try anything, she would be wary. Li Yan’s smile was as beautiful as a flower. She looked at my stomach “This child’s life is full of danger, from the beginning it’s already endured so much. Who knows if more will befall it.....”

I laughed out loud and stop her from saying the rest of her ill words “How could that be possible? Qu Bing and I have never done anything bad we need to be wary of. Since your highness believes in fate, you ought to worry about yourself. Worrying too much may shorten a life. Hearing your highness has been sick recently, perhaps you’ve been worrying too much.” Li Yan’s grip on her handkerchief was so tight her knuckles turned white.

“I came to thank your highness for your “care and affection”, but now I need to go thank the Empress as well. May I be excused?”

I turn to leave and her cold voice rings out “Do you really think the Empress is protecting you? If Empress Wei was so innocent she couldn’t possibly have dominated the Back Palace for so long, causing Empress Chen to die alone in the Cold Palace. Wei Shao Er is an idiot compared to her. Empress Wei and Wei Qing are the two smartest in that family. All the Wei relatives are against Huo Qu Bing marrying you, except for those two. They neither object nor do they support. Empress Wei doesn’t care about previous issues between you two, always taking good care of you. Jin Yu, you can’t possibly be smart your entire life and then stupid when it comes to this?”

She casually said, each word carefully “Did you honestly think your illness was caused by me?” My head started to turn but I kept my smile on my face and courtesied to Li Yan before walking out. She suddenly asked “Why? Jin Yu, why?” I was confused so I stopped “Why what?”

Her smile disappeared and all that remained was sadness and confusion “I should call you Yu Jin. Why did you not revenge the Shan Yu of the Xiong Nu. Don’t you have the same grudge for your father’s death that I carry?” “So you did discover my true identity. Sorry to disappoint you, it’s of not much value. Even if I were a Xiong Nu person, any vengeance I have ought to be against Yi Zhi Xie, and not helping him fight the Han dynasty.”

“Jin Yu, I just want to know why. Before I entered the Palace, you counseled me to give up my revenge plans and live my own life. I thought then that you didn’t understand my pain so you could say such easy things. But now I know that you do understand, you do know my vengeance” Li Yan’s voice was sorrowful.

Different than her usual seductive beauty, Li Yan was like a lost child right now, her eyes filled with a deep hopelessness. My heart softened for a moment and I sighed before sincerely answering her “Because I had a Papa who loved me a lot, and met the man my Papa was hoping could give me happiness. I’m actually as straight as a string. If I decided on vengeance I would see it through to the bitter end. If my Papa didn’t force me to promise him that I would live my own happy life, then I would have tried to revenge the

Xiong Nu a long time ago. I would have never come to Chang An. I would not have met Jiu Ye, met Qu Bing, perhaps.....” I shook my head with a bitter smile “Perhaps I would have run out of options and seduced Yi Zhi Xie or married him. But the only difference is that I would have waited until he lowered his guard to me before killing him. And you want to put your son on the throne to control the entire Han Empire.”

Li Yan’s eyes were full of tears “Your Papa wanted you to forget the past and walk your own path. My mom refused to let me forget the vengeance. The moment before she died she stared at me and made me promise that I would seek revenge for her before she closed her eyes and died.”

I pick up my skirt to leave and Li Yan’s voice still rang out behind me “Why? Why?It’s not fair. The Heavens are not fair....You and I ought to have the same fate in life, but why are you free to come and go as you please, with Jiu Ye and Huo Qu Bing wholeheartedly loving you, and friends who care about you. Jin Yu, why do you have more happiness than me? I hate you, I hate you.....”

Before stepping out of the room, I turned back and Li Yan was sitting on the pallet dressed to the nines in silk and jewels. Her skirt was fanned around her making her seem tiny and helpless, and her eyes were filled with despair and her face was ashen. I see that the jade curtains in front of her bedroom are just like the bars of a prison. The sun shines outside, but cannot enter the darkness of the courtyard.

My heart shook, it was like seeing an alternate version of myself. I hurry out of the room. The more I walk forward in life, the more I understand Papa’s wisdom and know how fortunate I am. At a juncture in my life, if I had chosen a different path, I would have lived a completely different life.

Li Yan, you actually have a lot. You have brothers who love you, Li Gan who wants for you to happy, and a beautiful son. For your purpose you lost yourself. Even if you succeeded, would you be happy?

The residence of the Empress is always suffused with floral fragrance. The large courtyard has not a single person in it, while the purple flowers above are slowly dropping its petals as I walk. Under the awning, Empress Wei is reclining on a bamboo pallet watching the falling petals dancing in the wind. The sound of water dripping can be heard, a steady beat. I stand for some time before she notices me, and without getting up she gestures me over. I quietly bow and then sit down next to her pallet. “The flowers are beautiful.”

Empress Wei smiled “I have too much time, and nothing to do, so I spent it all on taking care of the flowers.” I silently sit there until Empress Wei asks “Are you all recovered?”

Since everyone wants to believe I was just sick, I stick with the story “I’m all recovered, thank you for your concern these past few days.” I was getting up when Empress Wei grabbed my hand “There is just you and I here, so say it like it is and stop talking in circles. You’re tired and I’m tired of that.”

The courtyard is vast and despite the sun out it doesn’t shine completely inside. Sitting there long, I feel a chill that doesn’t feel good. The water continued to drip and I think of a poem about how lonely one is in the courtyard accompanied only by flowers.

“.....you learned your lesson this time. In the future you must be more cautious, and

endure it when you must.” I was zoned out so only caught the tail end of what Empress Wei was saying “Sometimes there are things one cannot endure.” Should I have watched my friend die before me? Should I have watched Qu Bing marry another woman?

Empress Wei looked at the ground covered with fallen petals “If you cannot endure it, then you MUST endure it. There is nothing in this life that cannot be endured.” My chill rose again, reminding me that this Palace may be beautiful but it was making me feel only emotional dislike and exhaustion. I wanted to leave so I got up and bowed to Empress Wei. She nodded “Take care of yourself, you can come find me for anything.”

I walk out of the courtyard and stand under the sunlight again. I can’t help it but take a deep breath. Sitting inside, I thought it was sunset already since the light was so dim, but it’s actually still daylight out. This place was just like Li Yan’s residence, the view was different but one thing was identical, the sun could not shine in.

I understand Empress Wei’s thinking. But sometimes it’s happier to pretend to be stupid. I’ve always only thought of myself as Qu Bing’s girl, and don’t have any relationship with the Wei family. If Qu Bing wanted to help the Wei family, I would support it. If he didn’t want to, I also support it. To me, it all boils down to what Qu Bing likes and what he wants to do. To Empress Wei, Qu Bing is someone she must get to support her. So she is nice to me just to show Qu Bing. Wei Shao Er may be Qu Bing’s mom but she doesn’t understand him that well. Once he decided on something he won’t change his mind.

Liu Che wants his relationship strengthened with Qu Bing, and maybe even take the place of the Wei family in his loyalties. He wants to marry a princess to Qu Bing for that purpose. But Empress Wei might not want that, and to her advantage Qu Bing also doesn’t want that. So she’s happy to support Qu Bing, which might even make Qu Bing lose favor with Liu Che and stop Liu Che from using Qu Bing to oppose Wei Qing.

I did understand already. With Empress Wei’s position in the family, if she supported me, there was no way the rest of her siblings would still be opposing me. I tried not to think too much about it and pretend to be stupid. Since all I care about is Qu Bing, that didn’t matter. But now I have the baby and everything I do must be careful and keep him safe.

Qu Bing might not get along with Wei Qing and appeared to be gradually eroding Wei Qing’s power, but Qu Bing’s reason for doing this is to gain Liu Che’s trust in him. But when it comes down to the position of the Crown Prince, Qu Bing would undoubtedly support the Wei family. But Empress Wei doesn’t trust Qu Bing in the same way she doesn’t trust Liu Che.

Living in a Palace without sunlight for too long, in the end there is no one that can be trusted except oneself.

If something did happen to me because of Li Yan, Empress Wei would just use that opportunity to her advantage. Qu Bing will never let Li Yan get away with it, and all Empress Wei needs to do is sit back and watch Qu Bing get rid of her biggest rival for her. Li Yan and Empress Wei both want the same thing, but their methods are different. Their calculations are different and their results are different, that is all.

In that Palace, the only person who wants that child born alive is the Emperor. No wonder Jiu Ye told me if something happened to go find the Emperor but never mentioned the

Empress. He already knew everything. But he was concerned about my relationship with Qu Bing and didn't want me to be hurt.

I lay down in the carriage and sigh. Qu Bing is out there fighting a long and hard war, and I'm here in grave danger. But nothing will happen to me, because I will protect myself and the baby. Before the carriage has arrived at the Shi Estate I already see Jiu Ye's figure. He was waiting for me outside the gate and I quickly wave at him.

The first thing I saw when I get off is "I didn't drink or eat anything." He nodded and reached out to take my pulse. A moment later he truly relaxed "You've had a long day, have dinner and then get some rest!" My heart felt a twinge of emotion but I keep my expression casual and nod my head.

.....

"How long until the child is born? How long until the child is born?"

"Not fair, not fair, not fair....."

"I hate you, I hate you, I hate you....."

"When you can't endure it, then you MUST endure it....."

Liu Che's face, Li Yan's face, Empress Wei's face, they all flew around me and they continued to split into multiples until their eyes filled with coldness, anger, and smiles surround me.I try to run away while clutching my stomach but there is nowhere for me to go and I see they are about to grab my stomach.

I wake up with a "ah" and sit up on the pallet. The moonlight is lovely outside and shines its silver beam on the pallet, confirming that it was just a nightmare. My body was still shaking and Jiu Ye quickly walked inside on his crutch "Yu Er?" I held my head "Nothing. I just had a nightmare." He sat down next to me "No matter the nightmare, it will never come true."

His voice was like the Spring wind blowing away all the chill on my heart so that I slowly calmed down "Could the Empress have poisoned me?"

Jiu Ye had a bitter smile "Whether the Empress personally ordered it, there is no way to know. The Wei family is the court's biggest power faction. From Princess Pingyang to many officials, all are related to them. Either Li Yan or Empress Wei's factions could have poisoned you, and then are ready to point the finger at the other side. If it was Empress Wei's side, if they succeeded, they would force the Emperor to give a rightful response to Huo Qu Bing. With the Emperor's personality, he most likely would sacrifice Li Yan in that case. A beauty is hard to come by, but a great general is even harder to find. Plus a woman in the heart of the Emperor cannot equal his empire. But if Liu Che sacrificed Consort Li, he would always resent Huo Qu Bing, so this is a great way to kill two birds with one arrow. If it was Consort Li who poisoned you, then she would point fingers at Empress Wei or someone else. Only you know what she really wants. Perhaps her motive was even more understandable to you, so you paid attention to her and missed Empress Wei."

I had a sad smile "No wonder you insisted I stay at the Shi Estate. In my nightmare they wanted my baby. Until now, there are only short messages from the battlefield. I trust Qu

Bing will return victorious, and if he does yet again, he will have gained higher ranking and prestige than the Great General Wei. The Emperor might heavily favor Qu Bing, but once Qu Bing's power gets too large, Liu Che will start to grow wary of him."

Jiu Ye replied "On the surface General Huo appears arrogant and wild, but he really is very calculating. He must already be aware of this. The Emperor is also wise and ought to be able to control his suspicions until it is manageable. Plus General Huo will not allow for any opportunity for him to commit an punishable infraction."

"I know this and Qu Bing told me before. His tactless behavior in the army base and the soldiers not liking him is all because of these considerations. The results are good and the Emperor trusts him more than any other general. I'm not worried about that right now, I worry that the Emperor wants my baby. He wants to raise the baby in the Palace."

My heart started to ache and despite trying to control myself, I start to cry. There is no mother in this world that wants to be parted from her child. Even though its an honor for the Emperor to raise a child, garnering immense love and prestige, but in truth he's no more than a hostage in there.

Jiu Ye looked concerned and worried "Why do you think that?" I shook my head "I don't know, I just have that feeling. Even if the Emperor never thought about it, Li Yan will be sure to remind him to do so. Li Yan hates me so much that even if she gets nothing out of it, she'll do it just so I won't be happy."

"Oh right!" I suddenly shouted "Li Yan has discovered that I was raised in the Xiong Nu. That day when Ri Chan played the flute and accompanied me while I danced the Xiong Nu dance, the Emperor also saw that. Then the Emperor must also know my relationship with the Xiong Nu."

Jiu Ye's face immediately fell and his eyes were filled with pain. He quickly turned his head and looked elsewhere. I realized then how he must feel to know about that event. I bit my lip, wanting to say something but not knowing what to say. When he smiled and turned back to face me, he was back to normal "Think on the bright side. You have a grudge against Yi Zhi Xie, so the Emperor shouldn't be wary of you. But if you think on the down side, no matter what you are a Xiong Nu person. You really don't want to help the Xiong Nu?"

I sigh "That's all true. Qu Bing's position is very unique and if I tried to use Qu Bing to do something or encouraged him to do something for me, these are all things the Emperor needs to guard against. With Li Yan's clever fanning the flames, there is an ever greater possibility the Emperor will take the baby into the Palace."

Jiu Ye was silent for a while and then said "Don't worry for now. If you are not willing, no one can take your baby. We have three months time, we can think of a plan. Just get some rest now." I want to say something but Jiu Ye shakes his head. He helped me lay down to rest "Even if you're not tired you need to let the baby rest."

He pulled the blanket over me and then took a fan to fan me lightly. I kept my eyes open and stared at the ceiling. He asked me nothing but knew my thoughts. "You won't have anymore nightmares. I will stay here and keep the nightmares away. So hurry up and close your eyes to sleep."

Even though he said it jokingly, his voice was sure and unwavering, so much so there was no room to doubt him. I look at his gentle eyes and my heart started to thump so I quickly shut my eyes, afraid to look any longer. With the rise and fall of the fan, a cool breeze wafts over me. I realized that I was so preoccupied with the welfare of the baby that I neglected to take into account his feelings.

My heart just ached with pain and my mind cried out a thousand "I'm sorries."

"Yu Er, don't think too much. There is nothing to be sorry for....." His voice was low and I couldn't hear the rest of what he was saying. My body didn't move an inch, pretending to be asleep is my only choice.

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Chapter 34: Dangerous Plot

The Northern desert battle has the Great General Wei commanding fifty thousand troops and departing from Ding Xiang, while Huo Qu Bing commands fifty thousand troops and departs from Dai Jun, along with fourteen thousand horses and one hundred thousand foot soldiers.

Huo Qu Bing disregards personal conflicts and greatly uses Li Gan as his second-in-command, and he also heavily uses the surrendered Xiong Nu elite talent from the previous battles. Under his command is a group of seasoned and brave warriors. This leader of the pack roams through the desert over thousands of miles and finally meets up with the Left Sage King of the Xiong Nu army.

Even though he is attacking deep within Xiong Nu territory, but Huo Qu Bing knows this area well. His riders are more fleet and courageous than the Xiong Nu riders, and he defeats the Left Sage King. He also captures important officials to the Shan Yu, kills some tribal leaders and officials, and captures the Left Sage King's banner and drum. The Xiong Nu forces are in disarray. Huo Qu Bing's forces quickly cross over the Hou Mountains and he captures more tribal leaders, generals, and ministers numbering a total of eighty-three. He manages to kill over seventy thousand Xiong Nu, completely destroying the Left Sage King's forces.

Wei Qing's forces travel over the desert and meet up with the forces of the Shan Yu himself. He faces them with a new formation and also burns their supplies which greatly weakens the Shan Yu's forces. During the confusion the Han army manages to kill over twenty thousand Xiong Nu soldiers.

Under Liu Che's orders, because of what happened in the past and Liu Che is superstitious that Li Guang has bad luck at war, plus wanting to give Gong Xun Aou a chance to succeed, Wei Qing refuses Li Guang's plea to take the first attack and instead gives it to Gong Xun Aou and places Li Guang on backup. Li Guang once again gets lost in the desert and does not have a chance to face the Xiong Nu, and loses another chance to be made a duke. This white-haired general, under extreme rage and despair, commits suicide in front of Wei Qing.

Despite the suicide of Li Guang casting a cloud over the Han army, this remains the most significant victory of the Han army over the Xiong Nu in history of the dynasty. So when Wei Qing defeats the Right Sage King the following year, after five years of war with the Xiong Nu, the Xiong Nu have been completely defeated. Henceforth the Desert South

region no longer has the kingdom of the Xiong Nu.

The two generals Huo and Wei will soon return victorious. To celebrate, Huo Q Bing decides to build a temple on the top of Lang Ju Mountains to hold an open air prayer ceremony to the Heavens. The messenger returns to Chang An with this news. Even though I can't go see Qu Bing, I can imagine his cold and composed exterior hiding his excitement and glee on the inside. Right now he must be proudly on a horse surveying the Xiong Nu lands he conquered.

Since he was small he listened to stories from his uncle about fighting the Xiong Nu. He learned to ride a horse and pull a bow and arrow from his uncle. Since he was small he had a dream to stand on Xiong Nu land and conquer the entire vast expanse. Now his dream has finally come true.

Huo Qu Bing has not returned to Chang An but the poetic song he composed for his ceremony to the Heavens arrive first. It is sung all through the streets and in every house and hovel in Chang An. The song has some hidden meanings that I don't understand immediately, with Qu Bing seemingly misusing some phrases. Tian Cao compliments that a warrior can do so well already in writing a song about the end of war and hoping for peace to the nation.

I mull over it and discover that within the song are hidden references to the great historical figure Fang Li, who won many wars but eventually gave up his political career to travel the world. Jiu Ye looked at me with a smile that hid his despair "General Huo admires Fang Li?" I nodded my head, happy inside but also worried "Do you think the Emperor will discern the hidden meaning behind his words?"

"Only one word in the entire text references it, and it has a dual meaning. You know that General Huo once complimented Fang Li so you can guess. How many people in the Han dynasty know General Huo as well as you do? Most people will see General Huo as just a fighting man, and that he used a word incorrectly in this song."

Tian Cao, who had thought Qu Bing just misused a word, turned red and stuttered "General Huo is not Xi Ma Xiang Ru, why write a song that is now sung all over Chang An?" I reply "Qu Bing is probably using this song to test the Emperor's intentions. In the song he mentioned Emperor Wu of the Zhou kingdom, a warrior Emperor who nevertheless garnered the love of his people. Qu Bing was complimenting Emperor Wu, but was actually using that to express his own feelings about future warfare."

Jiu Ye looked at the ground "The current Emperor is enamored of warfare. Now that the Xiong Nu is defeated, he's worried the Emperor is eyeing Xi Yu next. But General Huo no longer cares about the weakened Xiong Nu kingdom in the Desert North region, much less wants to prey on the weak and defenseless Xi Yu kingdoms. He's only interested in fighting an opponent like the Xiong Nu when it was at its strongest."

Tian Cao thought about it and then said "On the surface General Huo appears arrogant and thoughtless, only knowing to barrel full speed ahead. But based on his song, from composing it to sending it back to Chang An, his thoughts are much deeper than realized, and he's comparable to the Great General Wei in terms of doing things with forethought."

Qu Bing's biggest intelligence was letting everyone think that he was stupid at

everything else other than fighting wars. I felt happy and let out a small smile. But when my eyes met Jiu Ye, my smile froze and inside I felt a twinge of bitterness. Jiu Ye turned his head and wheeled out “We won’t bother you, get some rest!”

In ten days Qu Bing will be back. Since he deployed, my heart finally started to feel at ease. That is, until Wei Shao Er and Wei Jun Ru suddenly came to visit. Those two sisters are usually so chilly towards me, but now they are quite friendly. Liu Che wants to summon me into the Palace to give birth. They are here to congratulate me since my child will be born into the same treatment as the royal children. It is such a honor and privilege.

Honor and privilege! I see their smiles and want to grab a broom to sweep them out. Do they not know what is behind this great honor and privilege? Do they not know, or don’t want to know? Seeking wealth and power in this dangerous place, even Wei Zhi Fu as the Empress has to endure much danger.

It was nearing the end of Summer, and some of the flowers are at the end of their bloom cycle. Isn’t life just like that? When the water is full means its about to overflow. When the moon is full means its about to wane. When power is at its peak means its will soon weaken.

Is this the Emperor’s response to Qu Bing’s song? When Qu Bing returns, I will already be in the Palace, so will he dare to oppose the Emperor and take me back home? When power is at its peak, even one misstep could mean complete destruction. I have made up my mind.

Inside the study, Jiu Ye is flipping through medical books and I barge in and sit right across from him “Jiu Ye, I need to ask you for a favor. You must agree.” Jiu Ye’s grip on the book tightened and he immediately said “I won’t agree.”

I stare at him without blinking “I’ve flipped through all the medical texts these past few days but can’t find any that discusses speeding up the date of delivery. I understand the risks, but I have no choice despite knowing I am gambling with my life and the life of my baby.”

Jiu Ye’s eyes were filled with despair and he softly said “There are other ways. We can leave Chang An immediately, we can leave all this chaos and fighting behind.” I stare at him but didn’t answer what he said “If you don’t agree, then I will find another doctor.”

I knew I was forcing him, but right now I have no choice. I cannot leave Chang An with him, what position would that place Qu Bing in? His expression turned distressed, within his ashen face was pure hopelessness. My heart hurt to the point it felt numb. We really have passed each other by. I have already chosen Huo Qu Bing. No matter what happens, what obstacles and challenges, I will not leave. I will not leave Huo Qu Bing to be alone in Chang An to weather this storm.

I silently get up and walk out, and his weak voice says “I agree.”

I knew he would agree, because he would never place my life in the hands of another person. I don’t react and continue to calmly walk outside. I keep my voice steady as I coolly say “Thank you!” But silent tears are falling, the tears are falling for him. And I cannot let him know, I would rather he saw only my seemingly cold figure.

A late Summer storm passes and the ground is wet. When I walk the Palace physician sent to check on me out, I slip on a step and in the eyes of everyone my stomach hits the ground first. But in truth I've used one hand and my knee to temper the impact. To make it more realistic, I let my other arm hit the ground hard and scrape it so that it is bloody. I crush the Cha Mo flower leaves that is hidden in my hand, and the fragrance wafts in through my nose and hits the medicine I drank earlier. It mixes together to induce labor. Soon my entire body is curled into a ball, my sweat and blood seeping through my clothes.

The physician screams for help and Jiu Ye anxiously picks me off the ground. My blood seeps into his white robe, almost like a red flower blooming. His face has not a shred of color, and in his dark eyes I see only fear as deep as the ocean.

Jiu Ye knows this was all orchestrated but he's reacting like it's real. No one will suspect. But when I see him sweating, I know he's not acting. This is his honest reaction. From the moment I drank the labor inducing medicine, my life was on the line.

I force a smile for him to indicate I'm fine, but then I realize I can't control my body anymore. The pain makes me moan and my teeth clench. I bite my lip until its bleeding. Jiu Ye's brows are furrowed and he puts his hand in my mouth so that I will bite him instead. He doesn't want me to hurt myself. I try to turn away so I don't hurt him but my clenching teeth still bites down on his hand.

His beads of sweat are rolling down his face, almost like his tears are falling. My blood, his blood, my sweat, his sweat, it all mixes together. I taste the sweet acrid blood in my mouth and all my strength dissipates. My consciousness starts to muddle and my bodily pain seems to going away. But my emotional pain appears even more pronounced, so much that my feelings break free of my logical shackles and everything is expressed in my eyes. My tears also cannot be controlled and I just start crying in front of him.

Before I pass out, all I hear is "Yu Er, don't cry, don't cry, don't cry....."

The moment I regain consciousness, the feeling of body-rendering pain causes even the normally tough me to cry out in pain. I don't know how long I have been passed out, but its already dark outside the room. A curtain is pulled across my chest, with two midwives busy behind the curtain and Jiu Ye sitting beside me outside the curtain. He looked tired but he was calm and tightly gripped my hand "Nothing will happen to you. You will be fine." But his shaking hand betrayed his real feelings. He was frightened, so I use my energy to smile and weakly nodded my head.

One hour passes, and another, and yet another. Still there is only indescribable pain. The baby still won't come out. Baby, why don't you come out? Mom's energy is almost all used up. With one more scream from me, the midwife suddenly cried out "The baby is out! It's a boy, and despite being born two months early and is so tiny, it has a lot of energy. You can tell it's not an average baby."

Jiu Ye relaxed "Yu Er, you did well."

One midwife carried the baby out and happily showed him to me. I heard his cries and my heart shook. I felt this immense sorrow that almost knocked me out. Baby, are you crying because you know that from the moment you are born you won't be able to see your mom?

Jiu Ye pressed on my forehead and woke me up, then he exchanged a look with Tian Cao standing in the doorway. They looked at me and despite all my longing, I nod my head. Tian Cao came inside to take the baby “The nanny has been waiting for quite some time. The Palace has also sent someone to wait for the baby. I will bring the baby to them.”

I make this noise that I can’t even tell what I’m trying to say. Tian Cao stopped and I stared at the bundle in his arms. After a few moments, I forcefully close my eyes. Jiu Ye said to Tian Cao “You can go!”

Jiu Ye’s hand on my wrist, I can feel the heavy emotion and his fingers turning cold. I force a smile “I’m not hurting anymore, just tired and sleepy. My body is strong, you don’t need to worry. After a good rest I’ll recover.”

The midwife cried out “The bleeding won’t stop, won’t stop.” She was afraid to look Jiu Ye in the eye and just lowered her head and shook it. Jiu Ye froze and then in a low voice ordered the midwife to do something and then ordered medicine to be brewed.

Buckets of clean water are brought in one after another, and buckets of bloody water are removed one after another. I wondered if all that blood came from me? There was a sense of bone deep exhaustion coming over me, making me weak and lazy. All I want to do is sleep, but Jiu Ye won’t let me. He keeps whispering in my ear and forcing me to stare at his eyes and won’t let me close my eyes “Yu Er, do you remember when we first met?”

How could I forget? The vast yellow sand, the blue-green spring water, this white-robed young man that was as clear at the moon above the Sky Mountain.

“Do you remember that outfit? It was given to me by a good friend in Luo Lan. He said it was for my wife, and laughed that since I had a wedding dress, my bride will be sure to appear. Then you appeared. Despite the rags on you, it couldn’t hide your spirit, an entire body filled with fearlessness but your eyes showed hidden sadness. But your face had only the most brilliant smile. It was the first time I had heard a girl laugh out loud without reservation like that. It was like the entire universe was under your control. At that moment, I thought only about how beautiful you would look wearing that outfit. But.....but I never got to see you wearing it.....”

My eyes teared up and, drop by drop, the tears fell on the palm of his hand. I try valiantly to listen to him but his face turns blurry. My eyes cloud over with this white fog and everything grows faint “Jiu Ye, am I dying?” Jiu Ye tightly gripped my hand “No, no, you’re not.....” I don’t know if he’s trying to convince me or himself.

I lay in his embrace without any fear, completely calm. Things I would never say I finally tell him “Jiu Ye, I’m sorry. What I owe you, I will owe you for this lifetime. I always wanted you to be happy, and I used to think of many ways just to make you more at ease and to not let anyone hurt you. But in the end the person who hurt you the most was me.”

His face was lightly pressed against mine and I felt the dampness. Who was crying?

“Yu Er, the person who needs to be sorry is me. I was correct about entering the Palace, your grudge with Li Yan likely started because of me, otherwise you wouldn’t have gotten close to her or helped her enter the Palace. You did everything right, and I was the one who always kept you outside. If I had been honest with you, then we wouldn’t have this pain today.”

Xiao Feng brought medicine and Jiu Ye fed it to me. Every sip felt like it took every ounce of my strength. Jiu Ye wiped my sweat “I know it’s hard for you to hold on, but you have to hold on. You cannot give up, otherwise many people will be devastated.”

I thought about Qu Bing, about our new son, and I felt like my body gained a bit more strength. Jiu Ye started to sing the Xiong Nu ballad I once sang for him, his voice swirling in my ears. In tune with the song, he inserted needles into my body. “Yu Er, I now know that all I want is for you to be alive. I don’t care who you are with, I just want you to be alive. I just want to know that you are alive and happy, then I will be happy. Didn’t you say you didn’t want to see me sad. Then you must stay alive so that I won’t be sad.”

My eyes slowly closed and I heard Jiu Ye’s voice “You must stay alive, you must stay alive, you must stay alive.....”

His voice, with such conviction and insistence to fight against the Heavens, even though my consciousness was scattered, but it became imprinted with another voice from a long time ago “You must stay alive, promise Papa, you must stay alive.”

A very long dark corridor, with a faint light at the end. I chase the light and see a wolf pack running ahead, including the wolf that nursed me. I rush to catch up but the wolves disappear and Yu Dan is there. He smiles and waves at me, and I call out wanting to run to him. Suddenly Papa appeared behind Yu Dan, and I happily call out “Papa” and run towards him like I did as a child. But he didn’t open his arms like he used to to embrace me, but he looked very angry like he didn’t want to see me.

I stand in place not moving, thinking of something but not being able to remember. I look back and its all dark, but there is warmth and light ahead, with Yu Dan and Papa. I take another step forward and see Papa’s despairing face staring at me. His sad face triggered something.....my mind flashed two blurry faces. Will they be sad like this?

You must stay alive, you must stay alive....

I don’t know what that means but it stops me from going forward. I take a step back towards the darkness and Papa smiles. My body begins to hurt.

You must stay alive, you must stay alive....

Every step backward takes me further from the light and my body is in more pain. Going forward means happiness, going backward means pain. But Papa is smiling and those two faces in my mind also seem overjoyed, so no matter the pain I keep walking backwards. I don’t know why I’m willing to endure so much pain that I feel crushed, rather than let the two of them feel sad. Step by step I endure the pain and walk backwards.....

“Yu Er!” Two voices call out simultaneously in joy. In my eyes I see two different faces, both haggard and exhausted. Both reach out for me, and both stop right before touching my face. Huo Qu Bing turned to look at Jiu Ye, whose initial joy at my awakening gradually turns into sadness. His face still has his usual smile but his hands turns into a fist. The veins on his hand are still faintly twitching but he slowly pulls his hand back. He turned his wheelchair around and headed out “I’ll tell the kitchen to prepare some food.”

Huo Qu Bing silently sat on the pallet and carefully embraced me. His hands are clasped together but his arms aren’t touching me, but remain in a protective stance. It’s clear he’s

hiding his worry and uncertainty. I try hard to turn my head towards him but can't move it so he helps place my head on his shoulder. He finally had a smile and truly embraced me, then he said "Yu Er, let's not have any more children."

Mention of children makes my heart ache, so I force a smile "And someone wanted an entire football team! Didn't you want a father-son team?" His chin was resting on my head "Nothing is as important as you. I don't even want to see the baby right now. As I stayed beside you, I thought about how giving birth to him caused this to happen to you, and I didn't want to see him."

I hesitated and then asked "Did you see the baby?"

He was silent and his voice was somber when he said "No. He was already taken to the Palace when I returned. The Emperor bestowed the name Tan, and he will be raised by the Empress herself. He will be treated like the Crown Prince was treated. Because he was born two months early, he is weak and all the Palace physicians are there. The Palace is all atwitter with this new baby. You were at death's door so I just bowed to the Emperor and gave him a quick update of the battle before hurrying here."

I see his blood shot eyes and my heart feels warm and ache for him "You again went days without sleep, right? Sleep first!" He shook his head "I want to keep you company here, I don't want to leave." I smell his familiar scent and it gives me an indescribable feeling of comfort "Then sleep here. I really missed you." I've never said such things to him first so he's stunned so much he props himself up and stares at me "What did you say?"

I pout and refuse to answer him so he stares at me "Repeat what you just said." I casually say "Good things shouldn't be said twice." He looked disappointed and laid back down on the pillow. I whisper in his ears "I really missed you. I really missed you, so don't even leave me alone in Chang An again."

He was initially happy but it turned into forlorn sadness. His hands brushed across my lips "I'm sorry." He must know everything that happened since he's been away, and I don't know how he thinks about everything. Perhaps his "I'm sorry" includes his suspicion of Empress Wei now, and the worry about the baby being raised in the Palace.

I was uncertain and hesitated about whether to tell him the truth about the baby, but he suddenly said "The Xiong Nu have been pushed out of the Desert South. They will have no more energy to fight wars anymore, and at most it will be small tussles in the future."

My heart shook "How did the Emperor reward you?" "Just the same old wealth and power type of rewards" his voice was filled with exhaustion and distaste. His usual excitement and bright aura around his eyes are all gone.

His battle with the Xiong Nu was because of a childhood dream, but with his success means he gains higher positions and more power in court. The initial excitement about being so powerful will pass and afterwards comes more than just fighting the Xiong Nu, it comes with political intrigue and battles in court. From now on, the burden of power will only grow more heavy.

He never paid attention in the past to these things. He once said to me "It's not that I don't understand, it's that I don't care." But now he can't avoid it, he's already been dragged into it. "Yu Er, let's go home tonight, okay?" After months on the battlefield and traveling

thousands of miles in the desert, and not being able to rest because of me, he was closing his eyes even as he spoke.

I let down all my burdens and softly reply “Okay, tonight let’s go.....home.” He fell asleep with a smile on his face. I put my head in his chest and snuggle there listening to his steady breathing. I actually am already home! Wherever you are at is home, your embrace is home!

.....

Despite wanting to leave that night, Huo Qu Bing slept until the next morning. When we left the Shi Estate, only Tian Cao came out to send us off. Jiu Ye went to the kitchen and never appeared again, and we all forgot that ever happened. Tian Cao gave a long list of medicines to Huo Qu Bing, saying that the Palace physicians can treat me within this month, but don’t use any of their medicines. He must strictly follow the instructions on this list. One month later, a “trusted” doctor can treat me and prescribe medicine. Huo Qu Bing looked it over and then unexpectedly bowed to Tian Cao, who smiled and said “I will let Jiu Ye know.”

Qu Bing didn’t trust anyone else so he insisted on carrying me to the carriage himself. I can’t convince him otherwise so I let him be. As we walk past the lake in the Shi Estate, the Lover’s Vines along the edge of the lake are almost ready to bloom. The white is not yet out, but the golden flowers glitter along the green leaves. Huo Qu Bing took a look and didn’t change his expression as he carried me between the Lover’s Vines. I bury my head in his neck as I cannot bear to look.

Before the carriage has even stopped, a fourteen year old boy comes running out calling “big brother”. His voice showed his happiness. When he saw Qu Bing carrying me down, he quickly helped hold the curtains up. Qu Bing looked at him with a warmth he rarely displayed “Yu Er, this is Huo Guang, my younger brother. I went to see my father on my way back and Guang wanted to come to Chang An so I brought him.”

Being called Qu Bing’s younger brother gave Huo Guang a sense of pride and nervousness, like he wanted to be worthy of it. He bowed to me stiffly and said “Sister-in-law, are you feeling better?” Even though everyone knew my relationship with Qu Bing, but no one dared to openly admit it. His calling me “sister-in-law” left me unsure how to respond. Qu Bing happily smiled and said to Huo Guang “Your sister-in-law is embarrassed. When she’s recovered, you two can talk all you want. What have you been up to these past few days?”

Huo Guang happily told him everything he did, his face full of excitement. From a rural area to the capital of the Empire that is Chang An, even an adult will get excited, much less a child. Plus he entered Chang An as the younger brother of the most acclaimed General Huo Qu Bing. I can see Qu Bing quietly listening and in his eyes I can see his protectiveness towards his younger brother. Huo Guang is smart and can tell I’ve already accepted him. He looked relieved and confident, not calling me sister-in-law anymore, but still being very warm and familiar with me.

When I am fully recovered, the late Summer has turned into early Winter. This is the longest I have ever been sick in my entire life. It was due to my heartiness and Jiu Ye’s medical skills that I was saved. Any other woman would already be six feet under.

When it's late at night and I think about it, I break into a cold sweat. I can't believe how audacious I was. If anything went wrong, once Qu Bing found out, would he ever forgive Jiu Ye? But for the sake of the baby, I didn't even consider these things. All I could think about was how to protect my child so that he would not be taken into the dark Palace where there was no sunlight. I would never allow my baby to become a chess piece for Liu Che to control Qu Bing.

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Chapter 35: Trust

What Huo Qu Bing described as “just the usual wealth and power” turned out to be so vast it stuns the entire court and nation. With this victory, Emperor Wu of Han awards him wealth equal to five thousand eight hundred households. But that is just the beginning.

The key is that all the generals who went out with Huo Qu Bing all got an official title and rewards. There are so many of his subordinates made generals and dukes that it takes up half the court of such positions. Other than Li Gan, who is conflicted towards Huo Qu Bing, everyone else who served with him are loyal and devoted since they went through life and death together. Especially the surrendered Xiong Nu leaders all are grateful to Huo Qu Bing and admire his courage and conviction. The bond Huo Qu Bing develops with these people cannot be understood by the scholars in court or the ordinary folks.

The position of Da Shi Ma (head of the entire military) is traditionally held by only one person, and in recent years it has been Wei Qing. To take away Wei Qing’s control, Liu Che purposely makes both Generals Huo Qu Bing and Wei Qing split the position, and raises Huo Qu Bing’s general rank to equal Wei Qing. With this, Huo Qu Bing’s rank in court has surpassed what Wei Qing worked years to attain.

Actually Liu Che, as uncle to Huo Qu Bing, knows him better than his aunt Empress Wei Zhi Fu. Liu Che may not ever trust anyone, but he knows that Huo Qu Bing is trustworthy on the battlefield and is not someone who cares about court politics. Huo Qu Bing will never pander in order to seek more power or wealth. He can chase the Xiong Nu for days and nights, but he doesn’t spend a moment with the court chatter. He often silently sits on the side and cares not to make friends with the scholar officials. This is probably what differentiates Wei Qing and Huo Qu Bing the most. Wei Qing, to protect and secure his family’s control, will endure and be willing to be solicitous even to Consort Li when necessary. But these things Huo Qu Bing will never do. Compared to the unfathomable Wei Qing, Liu Che clearly would rather trust Huo Qu Bing more.

But in truth, Qu Bing understands and sees all the politicking in court. He just doesn’t care, and he has his own way of dealing with it. Those who are adept at political sweet talking often find themselves hitting a brick wall with Huo Qu Bing. Take Li Gan, for instance, his numerous tactics all end up with nothing in the face of Qu Bing’s straight forward nature.

Because Liu Che is openly trying to push down Wei Qing while preferring Huo Qu Bing, the door to the Wei estate grow more and more quiet as the door to the Huo estate grows

ever more popular. Some people who followed Wei Qing go test the waters with Huo Qu Bing and surprisingly find themselves rewarded. When this news travels to Wei Qing, he just smiles “If people want to leave, why keep them?” Huo Qu Bing’s open door attitude and Wei Qing’s hands off attitude leads to all Wei Qing’s followers except for Ren An turning to throw their lot with Huo Qu Bing.

It’s not clear how Wei Qing sees Huo Qu Bing, or whether he understands the difficult position Huo Qu Bing is in. He treats Huo Qu Bing the same as usual, but his eldest son is very angry with Huo Qu Bing. When he sees Huo Qu Bing, he’s not polite or courteous, responding to questions with curt answers.

The Empress hears that I am recovered, and knowing a mother’s heart, uses the excuse of a Palace banquet to call me in to see my son. Despite giving birth to Qu Bing’s child, I still do not have an official title. The Empress wanted to seat me elsewhere, but Qu Bing publicly held my hand and said “Yu Er sits with me.” Auntie Yun wanted to say something but the Empress just smiled “Add another seat next to Qu Bing.”

I was initially worried about how to handle this, but feeling the warmth of his hand, I suddenly don’t care anymore. Nothing is as important as our entwined hands. Since Qu Bing is worried about my safety and want me next to him to feel reassured, then why do I have to concern myself with what other people think.

Huo Qu Bing held my hand and we walked through the crowd of people staring at us. I confidently return their looks. Because of the man whose hand is holding mine, none of your looks can touch the happiness in my heart. I will not lower my head or avert my eyes.

Huo Qu Bing sat me down and then shot me a surprised look. He’s shocked that the normally carefully me would docilely follow his way of doing whatever he wanted. I secretly make a face at him and he smiles at me, his surprise turning into tender affection.

The nanny brings the baby and walked towards us. Huo Qu Bing appeared unaffected on the surface, but I can feel his hand tremble slightly. My heart was filled with all these feelings, not longing but instead regret and guilt. I even want to escape and avert my eyes from looking at the baby.

Li Yan initially watched Qu Bing and I with coldness in her eyes, but now she has a slight smile. I suddenly am reminded that there are unseen eyes looking at me. Since I selfishly made the decision that day for the sake of my baby, then now is not the time for me to show my guilt.

I force myself to look at the baby in the nanny’s arms. It’s strange, his innocent dark eyes make me feel this ache inside and I reach out for the baby. All these feelings welled up inside and my arms are shaking. The nanny sees me like this and is hesitant to hand me the baby. The baby stares at me, and then lets out a laugh. I see his laughter and I can’t contain it any longer, my heart cries inside for my baby. Are you smiling like this as well?

Huo Qu Bing reached out for the baby, and his hands used to the sword and arrow is suddenly very clumsy with the baby. The baby starts to loudly cry and the nanny hurries to comfort him. The Empress sees us and says to the nanny “Take Tan Er away.” She said to us “When you both have calmed down more, you can spend time alone with Tan Er. The Emperor treats Tan Er even better than he treated Ju Er. Thankfully Ju Er is also very

loving towards Tan Er, otherwise I worry Ju Er will get jealous!"

Her words caused the entire banquet to start laughing, everyone is envious. They say the Crown Prince is so loving and give congratulations to Wei Shao Er. Huo Qu Bing and I sit there in silence. Li Yan's mouth slightly tilts upward as she smiles.

Huo Tan has his thumb in his mouth and makes little cooing noises as he sleeps soundly. Huo Qu Bing sits on the pallet and rocks his cradle with his hand, staring silently at the baby. I see Qu Bing like this and my heart hurts so badly like a rock has fallen on it. I want to tell him the truth but when I look around I see Li Yan staring at us from outside the window. She raises her eyebrow and shakes her head at me with a smile, before departing.

I see Qu Bing staring at the baby in a daze and I chase after Li Yan. She clearly knew I was coming because she was waiting in a remote area. Before I said anything, she asked "How does it feel?" I don't know what to say or how to respond so I just stare at her without an expression.

"Jin Yu, from now on, for every day Huo Tan is in the Palace, you won't be able to smile. You will worry about him every day. This child is like his father and gets along with the Emperor quite well. Right now he's the Emperor's treasure and no one dares touch him. But babies are prone to accidents. A fall here, a trip there, arms and legs are easy to injure. At that time, the Emperor will at most kill people who didn't take good care of him."

If it wasn't for her, I could have married Qu Bing; if it wasn't for her, Liu Che might not have taken the baby into the Palace; if it wasn't for her, I wouldn't have done this plan, putting lives at risk; all of Jiu Ye's pain and agony during those days were because of her; Qu Bing's guilt and self-blame is all because of her.....

She was smiling so full of herself, so happy, that this moment she wasn't just Li Yan with her calculated plans, she was just a woman who suffered in the Palace taking out her rage on me. If I was in pain, then she would feel better about her life. All my concealed and built up rage suddenly exploded and in a flash I was standing right in front of her and my hands were around her neck. Li Yan's face turned white and she started coughing, though she still smiled "I forgot you knew martial arts! But this is not the desert of the Xi Yu region for you to do as you will! Do you dare? Can you handle the consequences?"

So she's not the only one gone crazy, I'm also going crazy. I take a deep breath and slowly release my hands and smile and bow to her "Will your highness please forgive my lapse."

I reach out to fix her robe and say in a low voice "Your highness, neither Qu Bing nor I are kindhearted people. If Tan Er has even one hair on his head missing, I will have one thousand Luo Lan people die. If Tan Er fell anywhere, I will have ten thousand Luo Lan people die. If he has anything else happen to him, I will have ALL of Luo Lan.....go to the grave with him!"

Li Yan stared at me in shock, and before she can response, I caress her cheek and continue "Don't worry, I will never reveal your identity. I will never reveal your identity. At most all I will do is destroy Luo Lan. Qu Bing holds extensive military power. Even if he was just passing through Luo Lan on the way to war, he can easily kill tens of thousands of Luo Lan citizens. The Emperor won't even care. Ay! I wonder what the population of Luo Lan is? Or I can set a trap for Luo Lan to do something that angers the Emperor, and if he

gets angry, he can easily wipe out Luo Lan.”

Li Yan’s eyes were wide open “You wouldn’t do it.” The more I argue the less believable it is, so I just smile and walk away while keeping my eyes trained on hers. She sees my expression and starts to doubt her own words. Seeing her expression, I know my threat has worked. I turn and walk away. Tan Er, this is the only thing I can do for you as a mother.

Li Yan started laughing behind me “Jin Yu, you....” I didn’t turn around. She and I have nothing to discuss any further.

Since leaving the Palace, Qu Bing has been sitting in front of the sand board. He sits there the entire night. I thought he was strategizing as a way to help him deal with his frustration so I don’t bother him. I want to give him space to work through things himself.

Before sleeping I walk over there and see that the sand is covered in the character “Tan”. He sees me and smile, pulling me into his embrace “Yu Er, no matter what the Emperor says, I will bring our child back to your side.” I startle and hurriedly say “Right now the political situation is precarious, neither the Empress nor the Great General Wei will agree with you opposing the Emperor.”

Li Guang’s death has caused a lot of officials to support the Li family and start opposing the Wei family’s stronghold on power. Plus the populace has very high regard for Li Guang and they blame Wei Qing for his terrible death. In court, neither Li Yan nor any of the other concubines opposing Empress Wei will let this opportunity pass them by. Everyone will align to topple the Wei family first and then deal later with what to do. All the factions opposing the Crown Prince are working together now despite the fact that they may be enemies down the road.

Li Guang’s younger brother Li Cai is currently the prime minister and the head of hundreds of ministers. He got there from a military background, and since Li Guang’s suicide he has been calm and trying to control all the Li family members. But it’s exactly his calm that ought to make people afraid. The more calm he is, the more dangerous he is. Right now Empress Wei is no longer the woman who was beloved by the Emperor, and Wei Qing is now longer the Emperor’s most trust general. Wei Zhi Fu may be Empress, but everyone knows that the Emperor adores Li Yan above all in the Palace. Wei Qing may be a general, but everyone can see the Emperor has already relied on Huo Qu Bing in order to take away Wei Qing’s power.

Right now in court, Huo Qu Bing has become the most pivotal person, with both sides trying to gauge his attitude. If he can’t stay above the fray and with one move, either side will try to destroy him. Outside attacks aren’t scary, what’s worse is if the Wei family tries to take him down so that Liu Che can’t rely on him to oppose Wei Qing. The Wei family has no idea that underneath Huo Qu Bing’s silence and coldness is a passionate heart. Perhaps they don’t care to know since they are immersed in political strategizing all day long.

Huo Qu Bing heard what I said and didn’t understand why I appeared so concerned for the Wei family. Once he realized what I was worried about, I could see sadness flash through his eyes and then it changed into warmth and a smile for me. He hugged me tightly “Silly Yu Er, you don’t need to worry about me. I will be protecting you and the baby for the rest

of your lives. I won't be so easily set up by anyone."

Outside the curtains there was a slight sound. Huo Qu Bing was likely too focused on me, or he thought it was Uncle Chen and this was his home, so his defenses were down and didn't even hear it. After a moment, Qing Wu walks in with the tea tray from outside the curtains, her face red and afraid of looking directly at us sitting together in an embrace. She courteously place the tea tray down before bowing and scurrying out.

Huo Qu Bing didn't even pay attention to her, but I smiled at how fleet of foot she was, just like her name suggested. How many such talented people are hiding in this Huo Estate?

My hands encircled Qu Bing's neck and I kiss him. Since he's been back, we've spent the last few months together, but because of my health he's kept himself under tight control. With my forward gesture, he lets his defenses down and passionately kisses me back, picking me up and carrying me into the bedroom.

The moment we lay down we are completely entwined together. Initially I was doing this partly for show, to get us into the bedroom so I could talk privately with him. But now I'm just as aroused and completely lost in the moment. He wanted to slow down and he propped himself up and looked at me. He kissed me on the forehead and then continued kissing as he murmured "I've missed you so much....."

With my one sliver of alertness I curl around his body and press up even tighter. He was initially trying to slow down for my sake but with my actions he can barely hold back as he cries out "Yu Er" and then his hands move down.....

"Qu Bing, Tan Er is not our son." I press right next to his ear and whisper softly. His entire body stiffens and he stares at me. My eyes fill with tears and I quickly hug him "I'm sorry, I couldn't let our son enter the Palace. So I begged Jiu Ye to find a weak orphaned baby to swap with our son. I didn't mean to lie to you. But I worry that you are always in and out of the Palace, and when everyone is staring at you, they might notice something off. I've tried many times to tell you, but always there was a reason...."

I see his face turning darker and darker and my voice trails off. All my excuses and explanations disappear. It was all my fault, why even explain? My tears are swimming in my eyes but I try valiantly not to let them fall. Qu Bing's chest is rising and falling heavily and I'm wondering if he's furious. I let go of him to turn and leave, but then I can't bear it and grab onto his robe.

He stared at me for some time before saying very clearly "I am angry, but not because you lied to me. No matter if you lie to me, I know you're doing it for us. This idea is not something I won't be able to understand. But I'm angry that you put your life at risk. Was your early delivery also planned? Otherwise how could you have a baby ready to swap out without the Palace suspecting?"

I was ready for his censure, but who knew he wasn't angry at my deception. He has already come to trust me completely. My tears finally fall and I embrace him tightly "It will never happen again, it will never happen again....."

He suddenly punched the pallet violently and muttered "That Meng Jiu! How come he does whatever you ask? How could he let you take such a risk? Does he have the baby? Is

the baby healthy?” I reply through my tears “Yes, the baby is already out of Chang An and somewhere very safe. Even though he was born early by two months, but he’s not like the weak Tan Er in the Palace. He’s very healthy and very alert.”

He quickly wiped away my tears “Don’t cry. I’m angry but I’m more upset at myself. I vowed before your Papa’s grave that I would take good care of you and not you be unhappy even once. But since you came back to Chang An with me, it’s only been you enduring things for me. This all happened because of me, because I wasn’t by your side so you had to endure it all alone.”

The more he talked the more I cried “Good Yu Er, don’t cry anymore. I’m not angry anymore. Good Yu Er, no matter what happens in the future, you can’t use your life to risk it. If something happened to you, how will I.....” His voice caught in his throat and his eyes were red. After some time, he softly said “You are not just my beloved Yu Er, you might be the only family I have in my life going forward. The only one who believes in me, who trusts me, who stands by my side. Do you understand?”

I vigorously nod my head “I won’t ever do something like this again. I.....” I rub the area between his eyes “Even though I was unconscious and you were by my side during that time, but I know the pain and sorrow in your heart. In the future I will take good care of myself, I won’t ever let you go through this again.”

His eyes gradually warmed and he held my face and kissed me soundly. He then started kissing from the corner of my lips all the way to my eyes, kissing my tears away. The fire between us flared up once again and became impossible to quench. All my rational thought went away and I murmur “Qu Bing, you also must never let me go through something like that.” He indistinctly replied before he shifted and we were joined together.....

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The Spring arrived not at all like early Spring. The cold is still vicious and even the foliage doesn’t appear to be coming anytime soon. The calm in Chang An for the last six months is suddenly at an end. The Prime Minister of the Han dynasty Li Cai is accused of privately using sacred holy lands for his own use. Liu Che is very superstitious and believes heavily in praying to the gods and Heaven. He places great trust in the Taoist priests and shamans in the Palace, so much so that even the princes and princesses are polite to those folks. To have one’s own Prime Minister using sacred holy lands enrages Liu Che and he has Li Cai tossed in prison awaiting judgment.

General Li Guang lived a clean and upstanding life, good to people, generous and forthright. He earned a lot of reward during his time, but when he died he left no wealth. When his coffin was carried into Chang An, the citizens of the entire city wept for him. Now Li Guang has died for only a short time and his younger brother Li Cai has been accused of stealing sacred holy lands for his own use. This scandal rocks the nation. People do not understand politics so they believe this and curse the Li family to the sky.

Li Gan tries to round up support all over court, even coming to the Huo Estate, but Qu Bing does not see him.

When Empress Chen was cast out many years ago, one important detail involved a voodoo

doll being found in Empress Chen's chambers that featured the concubines who the Empress adored. Rumor has it Empress Chen would curse them every day. I have my own doubts about those voodoo dolls, which are easy for maids to slip into Empress Chen's chambers. Same with this sacred holy land, which could have been written incorrectly on the ledgers so that Li Cai could easily have missed it when he was apportioning the land.

This is classic warfare, with the Wei family seemingly doing every out in the open, but secretly keeping this trump card to push the enemy into a dead end. But things are not yet finalized, so the winner remains to be seen. In the middle of the trial for this case, Li Cai commits suicide in prison. The former General, Duke, and Prime Minister ends up killing himself over the misuse of a piece of sacred holy land.

Suicide? I laugh. If Wei Ji and I died in prison back then, would we have been coined with a suicide out of guilt moniker? Within a short six months, the two highest Li family officials Li Guang and Li Cai both committed suicide and the family has barely finished with one grieving period before it begins another. The two great Generals from one family ended up not dying in the hands of the Xiong Nu, but both by suicide.

Huo Qu Bing coldly watches all of this unfolding from the sidelines. He continues to train, hunt, and even has a football field built in the estate. The cheers on the football field remain energetic, but deep within Qu Bing's eyes I can see his disdain for all this.

Gong Xun He and Wei Jun Ru come visit Qu Bing, claiming it was along the way, but really they are eyeing the now empty Prime Minister spot. In fact, everyone in court is eyeing that position. Wei Jun Ru sees me and is so solicitous, asking how I've been and telling me to go see her if Qu Bing is ever mean to me. Since we're family.

Qu Bing might seem cold on the outside but he actually really treasures his family. His last name may be Huo but he grew up in the Wei family, so their refusal to accept me has always hurt him. Now he sees the Wei elders so warm towards me and I can see it makes him happy. I sigh and grasp Wei Jun Ru's hand back "With Auntie standing up for me, Qu Bing will never be mean to me. I've been embroidering recently and can't seem to do it well. Since Auntie is here, can you give me some pointers?"

Gong Xun He heard me and could see I understood what was happening. Wei Jun Ru looks at Qu Bing "There are lots of clever ladies out there who can embroider. Is it for Qu Bing? If so then I must go see it." Qu Bing's gaze brushed past me and he couldn't contain his pleasure. I take Wei Jun Ru out while Qu Bing and Gong Xun He continue talking.

It's nighttime and I can barely contain my sleepiness I hear Qu Bing softly call "Yu Er", but then says nothing else. I smile and bit him lightly on his shoulder "How come you're not asleep? You can do whatever you want. I may not want you embroiled in the fight for succession because it's a life and death proposition. But if it want to do it, then no matter what I don't have an opinion on it."

He didn't say anything other than tightly pulling me into his embrace. His hands quickly decides it wants to do other stuff and I whisper in his ear "You're not stressed anymore so now you want to bother me! I'm sleepy! You let me sleep....oh!" He smiled and kissed me, effectively stopping what I was going to say.

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 2 - Chapter 20

Chapter 36: Death Trap

For the empty Prime Minister position left by Li Cai's suicide, every faction works hard to push for their own candidate. Huo Qu Bing continues his usual stance at court of being cold and uninvolved. He goes to train the soldiers, play football, hunting, and making merry. In the football field, Crown Prince Liu Ju becomes a regular participant. Huo Qu Bing even takes Liu Ju out hunting, the two cousins not following court protocol and going into the mountains without any servants or guards. They are gone for three days and return bearing lots of animals.

Because the Crown Prince was gone for three entire days, the normally gentle Empress Wei is furious. Liu Ju kneels before his elders and asks forgiveness. He puts the entire blame on himself and tries to say Huo Qu Bing had nothing to do with it. Empress Wei sighs "Both of you cousins need to be punished!" Turns out Liu Che shakes his head and says "Forget it! Forget it! Qu Bing's wild personality isn't new. The first time he went into battle he took eight hundred soldiers and attacked a Xiong Nu army base. We should be relieved that he didn't take Ju Er on a trip to Xi Yu."

Qu Bing not following rules and doing what he wants is nothing new. What is new is how close he and Liu Che are becoming. When Fall arrives, Liu Che decides that the Crown Prince's tutor shall be the next Prime Minister. After the suicide of Li Guang, the battle against the Wei family finally comes to an end, with the Wei family netting a major victory.

I've never spoken with the Crown Prince, and my impression of him remains from the gossip in court. His personality is very different than Liu Che, and more like Wei Qing and Wei Zhi Fu. Even though he is the Crown Prince, he is very polite and solicitous to everyone. He understands the suffering of the common people, and takes a very different perspective than the military-minded Liu Che.

The Crown Prince's behavior this time really stunned me. He knows Huo Qu Bing's intentions and agreed to go out hunting with him. Based on his usual reserved and cautious personality, everyone will know this was Qu Bing's idea. But he took all the blame and kept insisting it was his fault. This makes Huo Qu Bing look even more culpable, and everyone will praise the Crown Prince for being so generous and kind.

"Qu Bing, the Crown Prince is still young but he's so calculating already." Qu Bing smiled wanly "In his position, being calculating isn't a bad thing. Don't blame him. If he didn't have some deviousness, then we ought to worry he won't be able to handle things later."

Even though Qu Bing said this, I can see the hurt and disappointment in his eyes. I feel hurt and frustration for him. He is doing everything to help them, but they still don't trust him completely. They want him to work for them, but they also continue to find ways to chip at his power and influence in court in any way possible.

I want to change the subject so I stick my tongue out at him and then pout "If you want to be a scapegoat then fine with me! But....." I walk up to him and tug on his arm "You have to take me out hunting. I hear the Emperor has invited all hundreds of ministers and officials to Gan Quan Palace (his Summer retreat) to hunt. Take me....."

He immediately said "No!" I shake his arm and keep pleading, but he walks away and refuses to look at me "I'm off to the army base, let's discuss when I get back." I ignore his escape tactic and stick by his side, shaking his arm non stop. He pleads with me "Yu Er, later when I have time, I'll take you to the mountains for a few days of fun. Why go with them? It's a hunt but really it's just more political arrows and slings. You won't have fun."

I humph "When you have time? When do you have any free time these days? You claim to be busy with important business, or maybe even unimportant business. Playing football and hunting, all you do is play. Everything you do has an ulterior motive, so you're just exhausted inside. I can tell you don't have much free time and don't expect you to take me out to play. So take me now! Take me....."

As we walked, all the maids saw me whining to Qu Bing and they all lower their heads and look away. Qu Bing sighed "You've become so shameless now!" I was staring at him this entire time so I didn't notice our surroundings. With his reminder, I felt a bit embarrassed but I didn't want to concede defeat "I learned it all from the Great General Huo! Since they've seen even more intimate moments, why do I have to worry about? Take me! Take me please....." I continue chanting the same spell.

He finally couldn't handle it anymore and turned to look at me. Initially his eyes were very sure but once he saw my expression, he gave a long sigh and shook his head dejectedly "Fine! Stop giving me the pitiful whining look. I'll take you."

I burst into a brilliant smile while he smiled in defeat. But once he saw how happy I was, he turned happy as well. He reached out and lightly pinched my cheeks "No wonder Meng Jiu does whatever you want and can never say no to you....."

I don't know if my smile stayed the same, but his immediately disappeared. He realized what he said unconsciously, joking about me and Jiu Ye, so he swallowed the rest of what he was going to say. He changed the subject casually "This is fine, go back now." I see we are at the front door of the estate so I nod.

My eyes see him off before my face finally crumbles. I owe Jiu Ye so much, and the only thing he wants is the one thing I cannot give him in this lifetime. So all I can do is live happily like he wanted for me. Then maybe he will feel some comfort. But then what kind of comfort could that be? I raise my head to look at the blue sky. Are there really Gods who live up there? Then I beg you to please let Jiu Ye forget me, to give him true happiness.

We were on the carriage out of Chang An headed for Gan Quan Palace, but Huo Qu Bing still couldn't understand why I insisted on coming for the hunt. He knows I hate gathering

with nobles and courtiers. And this hunt will be all such nobles and courtiers. Crown Prince Liu Ju, the three princes, Great General Wei, Gong Xun He, Li Gan, Li Guang Li, Zhao Puo Nu..... A bunch of new and old nobles, all the important ministers in the court. With so many people there, the security is sure to be tight.

It appears like a hunt, but it could turn into a monumental political moment at the blink of an eye. Who knows which faction is hunting the other at this banquet. I don't want to stay in Chang An worrying, I just want to stay by his side. Even if I can't help, at least if anything happened we would be together.

When Liu Che saw me, he pointed at Huo Qu Bing and shook his head with a smile. Huo Qu Bing saw Li Yan standing behind Liu Che and also smiled "Your servant I once again have the same idea as Your majesty."

Liu Che laughed "The same idea is good. With you blocking for me, those folks can't annoy me and claim that I'm a ruler who is mired in womanly wiles and can't rule. Who says a proud and true man can't have his emotional safe harbor. Living such a life is the true measure of a man." Huo Qu Bing and Liu Che toasted each other after that little speech. The relationship between them resembled that of warriors living by the creed of honor, rather than an Emperor and his subject.

No wonder Liu Che favors Huo Qu Bing. Deep down they share a lot of similarities, with very proud and passionate personalities, but neither adheres to the rules and restrictions. But in another way they are nothing alike. One seeks power and the other eschews it. And this is yet another reason Liu Che trusts Huo Qu Bing. Li Yan wasn't very well and she rested in the carriage in a very tired way. She must not be doing well these days, plus her health was never very good. With her inner worries, no wonder she's constantly sick. Seems like Liu Che specifically took her out of the Palace to cheer her up.

Liu Che truly adores Li Yan like no other in his harem. Coming out to hunt, he doesn't care about the inconvenience and still wants to bring along a Li Yan who probably would topple over if a gust of wind hit her.

Gan Quan Palace is located on Gan Quan Mountain, hidden deep in the woods with rocky formations, streams, and an unending spectacular view. Qu Bing has been here with Wei Qing and the Emperor since when he was a kid so he's intimately familiar with this place. As we entered the mountain, he pointed to every place and told me all about it.

Finally he just led me away from the entire procession, not even taking the horses, and we ended up walking hand-in-hand through the woods. We don't know when the others arrived at the Palace, but we played the entire way up so it was dark by the time we arrived at Gan Quan Palace.

We still didn't take the major road and instead continued to amble up across the little streams and over the rocks. Between an outcropping of rocks we could vaguely see two people standing there. We both have above average eye sight, and with even a little moonlight, we immediately knew who it is.

I was momentarily stunned but then I composed myself, whereas Qu Bing was shocked beyond belief and he immediately stopped and in his eyes was pure disbelief. It was impossible to tell if this was a chance encounter or one of Li Yan's specially orchestrated

“encounters”. We see Li Gan kneeling and bowing before Li Yan and wishing her well. Li Yan reached out her hand to tell him to rise, and the moment Li Gan rose he reached out and grabbed her fingertips.

Li Yan was likely as taken aback by Li Gan’s gesture as we both were. Her face was shock and her body shook, and in her eyes there were unshed tears. The normally smart and alert Li Yan turned into a rock and didn’t immediately pull her hand back. She just stood there staring dumbly at Li Gan. Li Gan raised his head and looked directly at Li Yan. Their eyes met and he appeared to shock himself out of his stupor and he immediately released her fingers and took a few steps back.

Even though it was mere seconds, so short I wondered if I was seeing things, and it was just three fingers and Li Gan probably didn’t even feel the warmth from Li Yan’s hand, but the explosion of hidden emotion between them was stunning to see. It wasn’t clear if Li Yan was planning on saying anything to Li Gan, but right now she just said nothing and rushed away from Li Gan. She was moving so fast that neither Huo Qu Bing nor I could hide ourselves and she saw us.

She immediately stopped and looked at us with her face ashen. Li Gan also saw us and immediately rushed in front of Li Yan as if we were ferocious beasts ready to harm her. But then he realized that we could be even more dangerous than ferocious beasts. Li Gan’s eyes were sharp and cold and his hands clenched into fists. Huo Qu Bing stopped looking so shocked and he pulled me behind him to shield me “Third brother Li, are you planning to get rid of the eyewitnesses?”

Li Yan laughed and walked out from behind Li Gan ” Our fates are not what the General cares about, but the life of your precious son surely will be.” I reply “I don’t know why you are all acting so strange. When Qu Bing and I came over all we saw was your highness running over. Before we could greet you, we saw Lord Li running over.” Li Yan smiled “I’m tired and best be off to rest.”

As she walked past me, I said “I never intended to use this for anything, otherwise why wait until today. It’s not out of fear, it’s out of sympathy.” Li Yan disappeared into the night, but her normally straight back appeared bowed, as if she couldn’t stand the pressure. Li Gan coldly shot us a look before also departing.

Huo Qu Bing stared at me with a raised eyebrow and I make a surrender gesture and said I would tell him everything. I only tell him about Li Gan finding the handkerchief, me giving it to Li Yan, and the reason Li Gan tried to shoot me with an arrow many years ago. I don’t say anything about me burning the first handkerchief and then handing a duplicate one to Li Yan later. It’s not that I want to conceal this from him, I just don’t know how to talk about that time without my feelings back then, and I worry how that would make him feel to hear it.

When I finish the story we walk back to our room. He didn’t say anything and just laid there on the pallet watching me get ready for bed. Many times I want to say something but he doesn’t respond. I finally fall silent, and the room descends into an oppressive silence. I look at the him in the mirror and my hearts hurts more and more. I bite my lip and want to say something when he suddenly gets up and walks behind me. He sits down and picks up a brush and starts to brush my hair.

“Qu Bing, I.....”

“No need to explain. Those things you did for Meng Jie back then were not wrong, that is your personality. I like you because of who you are. I can only say that I am luckier than Meng Jiu, and in the future all of what you do will be for me.” He pulled me into his embrace and said all this softly.

Despite his tender and sincere tone, I can see his face in the mirror with a devilish glint in his eyes. I push him off me and hit him “You did it on purpose! You pretended to be upset, to care, all to scare me! You’re so petty!”

He laughed and easily dodged me. One hand grabbed my arm while the other snaked around my waist. The two of us fell on the rug “Back then you led me on a merry chase, scaring you a little right now is nothing compared to what you put me through.”

His laughter and mine fill the entire room.

.....

For the next two days, I am like a puppy following behind Huo Qu Bing. When it comes to hunting I’m as good as the men, maybe even better. But now is not the time for me to show my hunting prowess, I just need to show that I’m not a burden tagging along with Huo Qu Bing.

But I have a bad habit. When I see a prey, I always forget to use my bow and arrow. My instinct is to rush it and Huo Qu Bing almost laughs himself to death as he reminds me “Yu Er, you have a bow and arrow on your back you can use. Don’t be like a wolf rushing it with your claws and teeth.” I give him a sidelong glance and he quickly adds “Your claws and teeth look is cute, I really like seeing it.”

Humph! His smiling is all lopsided, who would believe him! From across the mountain I hear loud yells of “A herd of deer!” I immediately clap and shout “Deer meat!” Huo Qu Bing rushed forward “What a great catch. Watch your hubby’s skill, I promise you’ll eat your fill tonight.”

It really was a herd of deer numbering in the thousands, all running through the mountains, the sunlight glistening off their horns. I look at the herd with confusion. Deer herds are never this big, so how did so many deer happen to gather together in one place?

I turn around and see Gong Xun Aou standing next to Huo Qu Bing. I don’t know what he said but Huo Qu Bing’s face turned dark and he looked furious. Gong Xun Aou nodded to me and then said “General wanted to keep this quiet. I only learned about it yesterday night when I heard the General’s personal servant discussing it. Now that you know, keep in under wraps for now and continue to enjoy the hunt.”

I ask “What’s going on?” Huo Qu Bing pointed an arrow towards the deer herd “Li Gan hit my uncle” and his arrow hit a deer directly in the neck. “What, he....” I don’t know what to say. How could Li Gan be so rash and strike Wei Qing?

Wei Qing is very special to Huo Qu Bing, who grew up without his father and back then Wei Qing didn’t have any children yet. The first time Huo Qu Bing got on a horse, Wei Qing put him on. The first time he held a bow and arrow, Wei Qing held his hands. The first story Qu Bing heard was his uncle’s battle against the Xiong Nu. Qu Bing’s lifelong

dreams were cemented because of his adulation of his uncle. Even though now it appeared they are at political odds, but no one could take Wei Qing's position in Huo Qu Bing's heart. Li Gan hitting Wei Qing is worse than if he hit Huo Qu Bing directly.

"Didn't you want to eat deer meat? Let's hurry otherwise all the deer will have left." Huo Qu Bing rushed towards the canyon and Gong Xun Aou followed. I can see him restraining his anger so I don't want to discuss it now and let it go, following them down into the canyon.

As I was running, the servant sent to assist us sprained his ankle. I stop to help, not wanting to leave him here since the deer herds could hurt him. Before I know it, Huo Qu Bing and Gong Xun Aou have disappeared. Clearly he's intending to work out his anger on the hunt. I tell the servant to stay put and rush into the canyon because the sound of the deer herds worries me. As I run in, I suddenly see a woman dressed exactly like me running through the trees. I'm taken aback but have no time to consider it before continuing forward.

The canyon roads get more and more narrow. I can hear the deer herds thundering through the canyon walls. I see Huo Qu Bing standing alone in the middle of the deer herd. Not far from him, Li Gan lays on the ground with an arrow protruding from his chest. A few dead deer are nearby.

Huo Qu Bing takes three arrows and fires them, all hitting a deer that is about to impale him. But behind the deer comes many more, all rushing forward in a stampede. The horns are razor sharp and can pierce Huo Qu Bing at anytime. He uses the dead deer carcasses to build a wall around him and Li Gan for the time being.

All the servants outside the canyon are screaming. Zhao Puo Nu wants to rush in many times but are always pushed back by the deer herd and can only shoot arrows in from outside. Liu Che appears and when he sees Huo Qu Bing's situation, he yells in rage "Why is no one going in to save him?" The servants reply "There are too many deer, and all are wild and vicious. The terrain is also very dangerous, both sides are sharp cliffs with only a narrow passage in the middle. The army cannot be used."

Liu Che suddenly snapped to focus and took off his jade and handed it to Gong Xun Aou "I order that the guards at the Gan Quan Palace be summoned to come here for a rescue operation." When Li Yan sees Huo Qu Bing and Li Gan in the center of the deer herd, her face turns white and she starts to shake. Liu Che hands fist into frustration as he paces back and forth "What happened? What happened to Li Gan?"

All of the servants say nothing, until one boldly answered "We do not know, at that time neither General had a servant with them." Different than our expression of worry, Wei Kang (Wei Qing's son) turns to look at Huo Qu Bing with hidden glee in his eyes.

All of Wei Qing's followers have gradually deserted him, leaving only Ren An still loyal. He is now the Crown Prince's tutor. I see him standing off to the side exchanging knowing glances with Wei Kang. Wei Qing finally arrives and hears what the servant said. His expression changes and he immediately looks at Wei Kang, Gong Xun Aou, and Ren An. Ren An and Gong Xun Aou lower their heads and refuse to meet Wei Qing's eyes, while Wei Kang looks at his father with defiance.

I stand on a tree and look down, seeing that Qu Bing's arrows are dwindling. Once he runs out, how can he face the thousands of angry deer with their sharp horns? I start to shake and my thundering heart feels like it's about to jump out of my chest. Calm down, you must calm down, Jin Yu! If you want Qu Bing to live, you must calm down. I jump out of the tree and run towards Zhao Puo Nu,

Qu Bing has only three arrows left and he sends them flying. He immediately leaps over Li Gan and grabs Li Gan's arrows. He turns and leaps back to his original spot and send three more arrows and three more deer falls. But one deer was right on top of him and it was too late to shoot an arrow at it. The deer's sharp horn is aimed for his waist, plus more deer are coming towards him. He sends three more arrows flying and at the same time he grabbed a knife with his left hand and sliced the deer's neck.

His movements were swift as lightning, and despite the life and death situation, his actions were incredible and breathtaking to behold. Liu Che, Wei Qing, and everyone watching couldn't help but let out a complimentary whoop.

I pull Zhao Puo Nu aside "Can you please chase after Gong Xun He. After he passes the Emperor's decree, I don't need you to do anything other than to watch everything he does." I don't have time to explain so I tell him this plainly. His face changes and he immediately says "I will not fail you!" His tone was that of an army subordinate receiving orders from a superior, telling me that he will fulfill this assignment with his life. I gratefully nod my head and he takes off.

I take cartons of arrows from a few servants and tied it around me. I climb towards a tree sticking out from a cliff side and then close my eyes before letting out a long wolf howl from deep inside my throat. With the howl, I release my hands and my body falls like a shooting star towards the center of the canyon. When the deer herd heard the wolf howl, they suddenly got frightened and their pattern became confused. The deer run into each other in the narrow canyon road.

I toss my gold ball sash around a tree branch and it slows my fall. I immediately release and repeat three more times, finally getting close to the ground. The last time I release, I look towards the ground for a place to land. Everyone holds their breaths and stares at me in mid-air. I have nowhere to turn and below me is a rampaging deer herd. The speed at which I am falling becomes faster and it looks like I'm headed towards my demise.

I send my gold balls at three deer heads and all three fall one after another. The fallen deer help shield me from the rampaging herd, and I quickly hide behind them as I release another wolf howl to divert some of the oncoming deer.

Huo Qu Bing yelled "Jin Yu!" He was not happy to see me, and his voice showed his extreme rage and fear. I smile at him, trying to make my way towards him "Watch yourself. If I discover you got injured because you got distracted, I won't talk to you for an entire year."

The distance between us is so small, but today it takes us forever to get to each other. Every step is between hundreds of deer rushing past us. When I finally cross over the barrier of dead deer carcasses he constructed, both of us have tears in our eyes. No matter what happens next, no matter if we survive today, at least we're together now.

The moment I arrive is the moment he sends the last arrow flying. I immediately toss the arrows behind me to him and he takes it and immediately sends more flying. I see the falling deer and my heart thunders as I think about what might have happened if I arrived even a few minutes later.

I'm not as good at archery as him so I let him take care of shooting the deer while I strengthen the barrier with even more deer carcasses. He was shooting his arrow and said "You idiotic woman!" Li Gan, who was laying on the ground not moving, coughed and said "This.....kind.....ofidiotic.....is your happiness." I see Huo Qu Bing is bloody but doesn't have any injuries. I look at Li Gan and see that he's severely injured by the arrow and is covered with blood.

I put medicine on him but he gives a bittersweet smile "This is Huo Qu Bing's arrow prowess, so don't even bother. He didn't intend to kill me with one shot, but he also wasn't trying to be kind. If I was treated early I might be fine, but now.....it's too late."

I try to stop the bleeding "You have to live. Li Yan is outside and she looks like she might faint. If you died, then she will fall ill again." Li Gan's expression was hard to read, it was like a lifetime's happiness, sorrow, and joy was all flitting across his face.

"Qu Bing, you....why did you do it?" At this time, I don't want to call him foolish, but he was indeed foolish. If he wanted Li Gan dead, why use such a stupid tactic. Li Gan is a Duke of the Han court, every generation of the Li family has served the Emperor. By killing Li Gan this way, he can't avoid the death penalty either.

Qu Bing said nothing and just focused on killing the oncoming deer. Li Gan said "Don't blame him, we were both set up. I was not happy recently so told the servant to leave. I went alone to hunt. Suddenly a woman appeared and began to fight with me. She was vicious and every attack was meant to kill, leaving me no choice but to be deadly back. Seeing the way you are dressed today, I now understand....." He started coughing and couldn't finish.

I try to help him breath "I understand now. I saw a woman dressed exactly like me run past. During the deer rampage one already would be distracted. Plus Qu Bing was already angered earlier by what Gong Xun Aou said to him. So he shot you when he saw you attacking someone who he thought was me."

Li Gan laughed "Gong Xun Aou told you I hit Wei Qing?" Qu Bing said nothing, so Li Gan continued "When I heard my father committed suicide, I was devastated. I went to find the Great General Wei to find out what really happened. Why he didn't let my father face the enemy. I was prevented from seeing him, and the guards were rude and defamatory towards my father. I was so furious I began to fight with them, and when Wei Qing arrived and tried to break it up, I inadvertently pushed him. When he asked why I was fighting, I couldn't explain without repeating all the horrible things they said about my father. The two servants made it seem like I started the fight."

I coldly say "This happened over six months ago, and Gong Xun Aou picks today to tell Qu Bing." Li Gan starts to violently cough up blood. He grabbed my hand "Ms. Jin Yu, I beg.....beg of you....."

A life was disappearing before my eyes and I can see his anguish and longing. I suddenly

realize that all the fighting wasn't worth it and I say "I don't know if I can do it, but I promise I will endure Li Yan as much as I can, and will ask Qu Bing not to harm her."

Li Gan took a few deep breaths, his eyes filled with gratitude. His face was completely white but he looked peaceful. Seeing him at peace, my last doubts went away and I do not regret making this promise to him. He closed his eyes with a slight smile on his face. His hand was still twitching, wanting to finish one more thing. After moments, his hand fell still and his lingering smile was tinged with impossible sadness. I lift his hand and I can see he was trying to write the character for "Li" with his blood.

I am not someone who is sentimental, but seeing this "Li" character, I remember the first time I met him. The drinking, eating, and making merry. My heart ached and I cut the sleeve with the character off and put it in my robe.

From a distance Zhao Puo Nu and some other generals have arrived and are heading towards us and helping to kill the rampaging deer. Huo Qu Bing tossed his bow now that all the arrows are used up and uses his knife to slice his way out. "He's dead" I say to Qu Bing as I walk up to him and also use my gold balls to strike a deer coming towards me. "With Li Gan dead, there is no corroboration for the set up. But there are still clues, like this suspicious deer herd. I don't know how they got so many deer in one place, but if I have time I can figure it out."

Huo Qu Bing held my hand and looked at the distance towards the rescuers "I want you to forget what you heard from Li Gan." His hands are cold, making my hands cold. My tears come but I force it away "I will!" Zhao Puo Nu arrived and kneeled down towards Huo Qu Bing but turned his face towards me "I did not fail you!"

Zhao Puo Nu saw the dead Li Gan and his face changed color. The other generals asked if the Duke was dead? Huo Qu Bing casually said "Bring Li Gan's body" and then he walked forward. Zhao Puo Nu bowed to me "If I was faster to arrive, maybe the Duke could have been saved." I shook my head and silently followed behind Huo Qu Bing.

Liu Che was overjoyed when he saw Huo Qu Bing, but it vanished in an instant. Li Gan's body was presented and Li Yan promptly fainted. She was immediately taken back to Gan Quan Palace. Liu Che looked at Li Gan's body, then gave a cold stare at Huo Qu Bing before waving everyone aside. All the servants and lower officials immediately scurried away. A servant wanted me to leave but I refused to move. The normally silent Wei Qing said "Let her stay!" In a few moments, the only people left are Wei Qing, Gong Xun Aou, Gong Xun He and other such high officials.

Liu Che coldly said "Give me a reason. Killing an high official is a capital offense!" Huo Qu Bing walked up and knelt before Liu Che and said nothing at all. Liu Che's face turned green and Gong Xun Aou knelt down and put the blame on himself for telling Qu Bing about how Li Gan struck Wei Bing a few months ago after Li Guang committed suicide. Liu Che was so angry he kicked Gong Xun Aou "Don't you know Qu Bing's temper?"

Gong Xun Aou kept bowing his head and saying that he deserved to die..... In a few moments, Gong Xin Aou's head is all bloodied from the bowing. Wei Qing looked torn. Many years ago Gong Xun Aou saved his life and he has always been grateful. Wei Qing knelt down in front of Liu Che and bowed "One is my nephew, the other my subordinate. Li Gan's death, I must also take responsibility. Please punish me."

Liu Che ignored Wei Qing and pointed at Huo Qu Bing “Seeing you commanding an army, I thought you matured. I thought having a wife and a son you would restrain your temper. But look what happened today! Tell me the truth, what did Li Gan do?”

Huo Qu Bing’s body was ramrod straight but the coldness seeped into his heart. He used his fierce exterior to hide his inner pain. The people he considered his family since childhood finally decided to take him out as well. I can tell Liu Che is also suspicious and wants to give Huo Qu Bing an out. But Huo Qu Bing won’t throw all the blame on a dead person and smear Li Gan’s good name after his death. He also can’t tell the truth, because it might endanger Wei Qing. Doesn’t matter if Wei Qing knew or not, Liu Che would use this prime opportunity to take out Wei Qing. And since Wei Qing is the Wei family’s strongest support, once he’s taken out, the entire family would collapse.

Liu Che waited but still Huo Qu Bing said nothing. He raged “Do you think I won’t kill you?” He pointed at me “Jin Yu, come here!” I walked up and knelt down next to Qu Bing. His body shook slightly but his eyes were still trained on the ground. Liu Che said “Seeing Jin Yu’s actions today, even though I do not favor her, I cannot help but be impressed. This woman has the courage to do anything for you. Do you want to make her a widow?”

Huo Qu Bing’s hands fisted so tightly the veins all popped out. He had grabbed a rock next to him and was tightly clenching it, so much that blood was seeping out from his hands. Liu Che coldly asked “Or let Jin Yu accompany you into the grave?”

I took Qu Bing’s hand and opened it, removing the jagged rock pieces and cleaning it up. I said “The other hand” and he handed it to me. I clean the rocks from that hand and use a handkerchief to wipe the blood away. “All done” and then I hold his hand. He didn’t push me away, like a piece of wood, he didn’t even react. I stubbornly hold his hand and stare at him without blinking. After some time, he turned to look at me and I smiled at him. His eyes showed only warmth and apology, but the pain and coldness from earlier went away. He grasped my hand back.

The two of us were acting like we were alone so everyone just stared at us with shock. Liu Che coldly laughed “Jin Yu, it’s probably pointless to ask you if you are willing to die, no?” I respectfully bow my head, grateful to Liu Che. Not sure if he was loathe to part with talent, or he was suspicious of the circumstances of everything that just happened, but he kept trying to give Qu Bing a chance. He was even using my life as a threat to get Qu Bing to open his mouth and tell the truth. “Your majesty, I am willing to be together with the General.”

Liu Che silently paced, stuck between the law and his legacy on one hand, and the life of Huo Qu Bing on another. After some time, he wearily asked “I heard people were trampled to death today in the deer rampage?” A few servants answered “Yes, a total of eight servants were trampled.....” One of the names listed was the servant who “sprained his ankle” to delay me. I look at Ren An, Wei Kang, Gong Xun Aou.....they are sure thorough.

When Liu Che heard it all, he nodded and looked at the sky, talking to himself “Li Gan fell into a deer rampage and was sadly trampled to dead. Give him a state burial!”

Everyone gaped in shock. Zhao Puo Nu and his group kneeled immediately “Thank you,

your majesty!” Everyone then reacted and all shouted “Thank you, your majesty!” Some stared in rage and envy at Huo Qu Bing. But under Liu Che’s cold piercing gaze, soon everyone lowered their heads and all knelt down.

Since Huo Qu Bing told me to forget what Li Gan said, I was already accepting of the judgment to come. Suddenly my heart was tumbling and this was the first time I genuinely bow my head to Liu Che while calling out “Thank you, your majesty!”

Liu Che glanced at the still kneeling Huo Qu Bing, his eyes still full of anger, then turning and leaving “Humph! Thank you? If you guys want to thank me and are grateful, then stop creating messes for me.”

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 2 - Chapter 21

Chapter 37: Chance Encounter

A hunting trip organized as a relaxing event concludes in the most devastating of ways. The Duke Li Gan was killed by rampaging deer, and Consort Li was so frightened by what happened she collapsed. Liu Che had no desire to continue and ordered everyone to depart Gan Quan Palace and return to Chang An.

Huo Qu Bing became unusually quiet, sometimes saying not a word for an entire day. Blood is thick with affection, and is something I value greatly and he's always had his entire life. But it is weak when stacked against power and the throne. I don't know how to console and counsel him, so I just quietly stay by his side. I hope that when he turns around and sees me nearby, he'll know that he's not alone.

Spring quietly arrived in Chang An and before anyone realized it, all the flowers had bloomed and Spring was perfuming the air. I strolled with Qu Bing in the peach blossom trees, and he plucked a peach blossom to tuck in my hair. He whispered in my ear "Want to go see our son?" I startle and ask "Not the one in the Palace?" He lightly nodded his head.

This matter can never be revealed. It concerns not just our lives, but Jiu Ye's and the people close to him. So Huo Qu Bing and I have a silent understanding to never discuss it. But how could we not miss our son? We are just too afraid to think about him. I embrace Qu Bing and with my face buried in his chest, I say a muffled "Yes."

He laughed and tweaked my nose "Oh! Oh! Look at this! We haven't even said our vows and you're already embracing me in public. Don't worry, even if you don't seduce me, I'll do my best." I was angry and embarrassed so I turn and leave. He started laughing behind me and I feel this sense of happiness despite my outwardly angry expression. He's slowly turning back to his old self.

After dinner, Qu Bing summoned Huo Guang to the study and they conversed for a long time. After leaving, Huo Guang had a very determined look on his face, almost like he grew up in a matter of hours.

"Did you encourage Guang to leave Chang An and go home?" "No! Every man must pick their own path in life, and have their own dreams. He decides his own life. I merely told him exactly what the political situation in Chang An is like today. I told him I might not be able to protect him in the future, and he might even face trouble because of me."

Seeing Huo Guang's expression, I knew what he had decided "So Guang still wants to

stay in Chang An?” Qu Bing smiled and nodded, looking pleased and proud of Huo Guang’s conviction.

In this March Spring time, the peach blossoms are blooming wildly but it turns out the political battles in court are even more eye catching than the most vibrant of flowers. Li Gan’s burial, Huo Qu Bing did not attend, while Wei Qing and Gong Xun Aou and those folks went to pay their respects. Princess Pingyang plays matchmaker for Li Gan’s two daughters. Liu Che feels sorry towards Li Gan, and also wants to keep splitting up Huo Qu Bing and Wei Qing, so he has Li Gan’s two young daughters named as consorts for the Crown Prince.

Despite all the men folk dying in succession in the Li family, leaving only women and children, the family has been powerful since the Qin dynasty. They still have supporters in court and in the populace. Li Gan’s nephew Li Ling, despite being young, has already demonstrated astounding military potential. He gains Liu Che’s notice, and Liu Che intends to make him a Imperial guard. Huo Qu Bing was eighteen when he got that title, which means Li Ling is already looked upon to be the next great general.

The Wei family’s gesture in this case pulls the Li supporters toward them for showing kindness to the remaining Li family members. It also draws a clear and obvious line between the Wei family and Huo Qu Bing, who everyone knows shot Li Gan.

Huo Qu Bing shooting Li Gan continues to be discussed and more and more people support the Li family. In the past they all opposed Wei Qing, but now they find Wei Qing’s courteous exterior more palatable than the coldness of Huo Qu Bing. On the surface it looks like the Wei family is opposing Huo Qu Bing and trying to take care of the remaining Li family members, so everyone starts to like the Wei family again and turn their frustrations to Huo Qu Bing.

Despite Liu Che protecting Huo Qu Bing, the appeals contain to pour in from ministers begging the Emperor to follow the law and not let Huo Qu Bing off. Liu Che has no choice but to send Huo Qu Bing away to the border city of Xu Fang under the pretense of guarding the city, to let things cool down in Chang An.

That day, there were only few people present when Liu Che was questioning Huo Qu Bing, and all information was supposedly sealed. So how did it spread until the entire court knew about it? Why are there so many people daring to directly oppose Huo Qu Bing at this time, especially knowing Liu Che is favoring Huo Qu Bing?

Huo Qu Bing continues to ignore the ripples in court and does whatever he pleases. He appeared to be encouraging those who oppose him rather than trying to placate them, letting matters grow to a frenzied state. Before he leaves for Xu Fang, Huo Qu Bing makes his first official request in court, to the shock of everyone. He asks that the three princes, with Liu Bo as the oldest, be made Infante Dukes.

When a prince is made an Infante Duke, he must leave Chang An and go to his newly designed territory. On the surface he gets to rule over his own territory, but in reality it’s to take the princes out of Chang An so they cannot vie for the throne with the Crown Prince. Huo Qu Bing’s actions cause massive ripples in court from both factions, while Liu Che does not agree or disagree with Huo Qu Bing’s request at that time, leaving everyone even more nervous. A few days later, some of the pro-Wei family high ministers all submit their

requests, backing Huo Qu Bing. Liu Che still does nothing.

Days later, the same high ministers, now with even more new supporters, continue to inundate Liu Che with requests to grant Huo Qu Bing's proposal. Still Liu Che makes no move. Huo Qu Bing stands to the side and watches all of this unfold. He can see this matter is heading towards success, but he appears even more concerned "How did my uncle let things get this way. He probably can't control people eager to make a name for themselves. The pressure is so great now that even if the Emperor agrees, he will grow wary of the strength of the Wei family supporters."

I reply "The Wei family was propped up by the Emperor initially, and now he can't even control them. It's no surprise the Great General Wei also can't control them. The Empress, Princess Pingyang, the Crown prince, generals, dukes, there are so many people who gain from this family. Their power is so great now there is bound to be internal strife. Compared to the mess of the Wang family and the Bao family years ago, the Great General Wei is already doing a good job keeping control."

Qu Bing laughed sadly "Yup! Everyone has their own greed and wants. I'm a perfect example. Even knowing the Emperor will be wary of the Crown Prince if his backers and support grows too quickly and too strong, so I don't want that to happen so I bring up the other princes in order to oppose him. The Emperor knows that I've placed him in a difficult position."

Everyone in court waits for the final decision, this matter having become a taut bow. If Liu Che doesn't agree, then the future of the political tide in court will be dangerous indeed. I think that right now, there are very few royals and nobles who are resting easy in Chang An. The unusual activity at the brothels and dancing houses reflect the people meeting to discuss what to do.

It is during this critical time that Consort Li suddenly asks to see me. It's so unexpected that I tried to figure out what she wants. Huo Qu Bing looks at the summons and tells me "Nothing to come of it, just feign illness and decline, I'll cover for you." I think about it some more "I hear she's been sick lately, I want to see her. If I hear what she has to say, it'll give us a better understanding of what the enemy is thinking."

Huo Qu Bing must think it's not necessary, but he doesn't object. "Whatever you want. Since I was planning to see the Empress, let's visit the Palace together then."

Before I arrive I can already smell the thick scent of medicinal herbs. Within the curtains I hear Li Yan ordering a maid "Tell Jin Yu to come in." The maid look uncertain but she opened the curtains and let me in. Li Yan's face was almost completely white, but her cheeks were unusually red. I don't know medicine, but I can tell she's very very sick. She smiled and pointed to her pallet "You sit closer, I don't have the energy to talk too loudly."

Her smile was different than usual, it was like when we first knew each other. It was peaceful and kind, without any distance or wariness. I sit down next to her and she smiles at me for some time before saying "You are still so beautiful and healthy. Still blooming, but I'm already wilted."

I assure her "Don't say these negative things. There are many doctors in the Palace. If empty your heart of worries, you can recover soon." She smiled wanly "I know my own

body. I don't have much time left. Every step I have been plotting, fighting and scheming, in the end losing more than I have gained. Jin Yu, do you still hate me?"

The memories of long ago flashed through my mind: that masked face, the girl with the bright and intelligent eyes, the face that could topple an empire, the girl with a heart full of troubles, the one who taught me how to play the flute, the girl laughing under the lamplight.....

I shook my head "I don't want to hate. I learned a lesson these last few years. Hate will destroy a person long before it destroys the opponent. I want to forget and let it go. I want to only remember the happiness in my life, and put the unhappiness behind me. I want to keep walking forward. A person's life is but a few short decades. Even if we rush it along, there are many interesting things to watch, see, and do. If we have the energy to hate, why not use it to appreciate the existing happiness."

She turned and coughed. I quickly handed her a handkerchief, and when she tossed it aside, I saw it was stained red with blood. My heart fell but she didn't seem to mind "Xiao Yu, you were lucky in life so you can say this. There are some hate in this world that cannot be forgotten. For example, if someone hurt Huo Qu Bing, can you forgive? Can you forget? Can you let it go? You will surely give your life to seek revenge."

Before I could answer she waved her hand "There is no need to debate this. Today I asked you here to beg you for one more favor and to ask you one question."

"Tell me. If I can do it, I will try my best."

"Xiao Yu, my heart is dead, I no longer care about anything else. But I cannot stop worrying about the people I've dragged into my own vengeance. I'm not worried about Buo Er, as long as the Emperor agrees with Huo Qu Bing and sends him away to be an Infante Duke, then he will leave Chang An and be safe. I worry my brothers cannot avoid it, especially my second brother. His desire for power grows stronger every day."

"I know what you mean. But Li Yan, you know that Li Guang Li chooses his own path in life. If he doesn't control himself, he'll be in trouble sooner rather than later. As for Qu Bing, don't worry. I think.....I think if the Emperor agrees with his proposal, that is probably the final thing Qu Bing will ever do for the Wei family."

Li Yan didn't understand my meaning "Last thing?" She saw I wasn't going to explain so she smiled and didn't push further. "I will continue to warn my second brother, and it's up to him if he wants to heed my warnings. The Emperor will miss me and I hope he will be lenient towards my second brother. The rest is up to the Heavens."

Li Yan silently stared at the incense burning and didn't say anything for a long time. I was also silent, waiting for her question. "Li.....Li Gan. What did he say before he died?"

This was one of the two things Li Gan wanted before he died, I believe he must be resting in peace now once he knows she asked about him. I sigh and take out the bloody cloth from my robe and pass it to Li Yan. She stared at it, her eyes starting to mist with tears. Finally one tear after another falls, almost like pearls as it hits the cloth.

She bit her finger and used her blood to finish the "Li" character. One blood was long dried and black, the other was still bright red. The black and red created a contrast that

made it appear that their lives were destined to be fated but never reach a resolution. She looked at the cloth for awhile longer before handing it back to me “I have one more favor to ask of you. Please burn this in front of Li Gan’s grave.” I nod.

She smiled and grabbed my hand. I grab her hand back. She gave me a brilliant smile, as beautiful as a flower. It was like when we first became friends “Xiao Yu, you can go now! I will beg the Emperor to return Tan Er to you. But with General Huo’s current position.....the Emperor will likely not agree. I pray you don’t hate me. If there was one day when the Han army is outside the gates of Luo Lan, I pray you can remember our friendship when we first met and beg General Huo to spare the common people and restrain his soldiers from killing more.”

I help her fix her hair and help her lay back down on the pallet “Your illness is from worrying too much. Stop worrying now. If that day arrives, I will do my best. Don’t forget that Xi Yu is also partially my homeland.”

She closed her eyes and her voice was tiny, almost like she was talking to herself “I’m tired, I’m so tired. Soon I will be able to rest at last. When my mother sees me, will she berate me? I tried my best. I wonder if she saw my father. I want to listen to the herding songs by the banks of the Kong Que River. The most expensive wine is not as delicious as the water from the Kong Que River. Actually all I ever wanted is to dance around a fire at night out in the plains, to go herding with the man I love, to give birth to a brood of children so my body loses its shape, to have coarse hands from plucking lambswool to make a cloth.....”

I lightly rise and walk outside.

Many of the maids are outside so inside her room is just Li Yan. She has been and always will be lonely in her entire life. I always wanted to ask her if she regretted entering the Palace? But now all our debt and vengeance is at an end. I hope that she departs this world peacefully. For her, she really did more than a woman could possibly imagine. If all the Luo Lan girls were like her, then Liu Che wanting to conquer Xi Yu would be facing depleting his treasury and a heavy loss of life.

I tell the maids to go back in. As I’m leaving, her personal maid stops me “Ms. Jin Yu, can you please counsel her highness to please see the Emperor.” I looked confused so she explained “Since her highness got sick, she has refused to see the Emperor. Every time he visits, she will only see him through a curtain. The Emperor is furious, but every time he wants to barge in, he worries about her illness getting worse.”

I think and look towards her room. Li Yan, are you doing this so that you can carve yourself even deeper in Liu Che’s heart? What can’t an Emperor possess in this world? But he is about to lose you, when you are at your most beautiful, when he longs to see you one more time.

I bow to the maid “I cannot help” and then quickly leave. In the carriage, Qu Bing watches my silence and doesn’t disturb me. He lets me zone out and then I suddenly say “The Emperor is about to agree to let the princes be Infante Dukes.”

Qu Bing raised an eyebrow “Consort Li is giving up so easily?” He then realized “Her body is in that bad a shape?”

"Yes, she's always been weak, but now her heart is dead as well. To protect her son, she will use her dying breath to get the Emperor to agree to the Infante Dukes. With the Crown Prince supporters begging the Emperor, plus adding Li Yan, he will agree."

Qu Bing didn't look happy and instead sighed. He pulled me into his embrace and I tightly hugged him back. I suddenly remember that I didn't answer Li Yan's question, but I do know the answer and she does as well. I tighten my arms around him "Qu Bing!"

"Yes?" "You have to be with me forever!"

Qu Bing's arms also tightened around me and he vowed "I will!"

When the peach blossoms fell, it danced in the wind and blanketing the entire ground in red. With a thousand emotions, an beauty who shook an empire was like the flowers, also falling and disappearing in the wind.

On Li Yan's last day, the Emperor finally agreed to make the princes Infante Dukes. Li Yan passed with a smile on her face,

Li Yan, she left a legend for the ages about her beauty. She left a legend about a poor girl who became the Emperor's most beloved concubine. But her true background, her struggles and her heartache, it disappeared without a trace in this world. And me, the only person who knows her secret, I bury it deep within my heart for all of eternity.

.....

Huo Qu Bing takes me away from Chang An and we head towards Xu Fang. Before we left, he asks to take Tan Er with us, but the Emperor says Tan Er is sickly and the weather is cold in Xu Fang so doesn't let him go.

Zhao Puo Nu tells me that Wei Kang, Wei Qing's son, asked the Emperor to join Huo Qu Bing on this outing and the Emperor agreed. None of us understand what Wei Kang is planning. I don't want to think about the unpleasantness, only anxious to leave Chang An and see my son soon. I remember his birth and how quickly he was taken from me, and my heart hurts. It also hurts because I know that seeing my son means seeing Jiu Ye again soon. It has been almost a year since I saw him. Is he well?

Despite Qu Bing's foray being called "protecting the city", but Xu Fang is well guarded and with the Xiong Nu out of the Desert South region, it in truth needs no protecting. So this trip out West, Huo Qu Bing is very carefree and leisurely. If he sees something I'm interested in, he stops and lets me explore before continuing. In truth I'm very anxious but I don't want to reveal it so I try my best to be normal not to arouse the suspicions of others.

Wei Kang has his father's adherence to rules and structure, but lacks Wei Qing's ability to accept others. He instead has the brash arrogance of the young nobles. He sees Huo Qu Bing's casual behavior and is very upset. Every time Huo Qu Bing wants to stop for a day or to, he objects. Huo Qu Bing completely ignores him and Wei Kang looks more and more pissed. He realizes that no matter what he says it doesn't matter so he shuts up. But he shoots more and more dirty and hateful looks at Huo Qu Bing behind his back.

Stopping and playing along the way, we finally arrive at Xu Fang. After Huo Qu Bing settles everything, he takes me out to play some more. With Xu Fang filled with Wei Qing

subordinates, Wei Kang is even more aggressive when he arrives at the city. But since there is nothing to do, he doesn't have any opportunity to find conflict with Huo Qu Bing.

The temperature differential in the desert is so vast that the days are hot enough to boil a person but once the sun sets its immediately cold. Huo Qu Bing and I often ride horses and roam the desert all night long. Sometimes I think that we can live here in Xu Fang forever and never step foot back in Chang An., But I know that wish is impossible. As the Wei family faction grows stronger with those supporting the Crown Prince, Huo Qu Bing is the only one who can temper Wei Qing's power in the army. For that reason alone, the Emperor will never let Huo Qu Bing go. And if the Emperor doesn't let him go, then it places Huo Qu Bing in ever greater danger as he opposes a powerful faction.

Huo Qu Bing takes me to places we've been before. From a distance I can see Ming Sa Mountains. With a round moon perched in the sky shining over the entire desert, my heart leapt and I raised my head for a long howl. I immediately jump off the horse and start running towards the Yue Ya Spring. In Chang An I can never behave this way. I finally feel like I've left Chang An behind.

Huo Qu Bing sees that my happiness differs from my pretend act during the trip out to Xu Fang and he starts laughing out loud. "Yu Er, do you know what the biggest regret in my life is?" I take off my shoes and dip my toes in the water. I think and say "Having an opportunity to fight Yi Zhi Xie directly? Allowing Wei Qing to confront the Shan Yu's forces face on and not you?"

He took off his shoes and also put his foot in the water "Success in battle does not depend on one person's will and courage, but requires the will and coordination of many people. My uncle faced the Shan Yu, I faced the Left Sage King. Who defeats the Shan Yu is not what is important, the importance is we cooperated to bring victory."

"Li Gan's death?" He shook his head "If it wasn't me, he still can't avoid his fate. A man must be willing to accept the consequences for his actions and I was the one who shot him, despite the reasons. I may feel sorrow but there is nothing to regret."

I kick the water and laugh "Nothing is right, then I'm not going to guess anymore." He was silent for a few moments and then stared at the water "My biggest regret was years ago, the moment we said our farewells at the Yue Ya Spring. I knew you were coming to Chang An, but I never told you who I really was."

I was playing with the water but when I heard what he said, my expression froze but I continued to play with the water. My initial cheerfulness dampened. In truth, at this Yue Ya Spring, the first person I met, the first person I said goodbye to.....wasn't him.

We both stopped talking and my hands playing with the water became the only sound in the desert. Huo Qu Bing used his toes to tickle the bottom of my foot. I'm ticklish there so I try to avoid him but he's agile and I can't find a way out. As our feet are tussling, my awkwardness goes away and I laugh "If you keep picking on me, I'll retaliate." I scoop up water with my hands and splash it on his face.

He splashed me back with a devilish grin on his face, and in seconds we are both drenched. I holler "We're all wet! How are we going to head back, we'll get sand all over us?" He laughed and jumped in the water "Since we're wet, let's not go back. We can

spend the night here and dry our clothes in the sun tomorrow before heading back.” He took off his robe and tossed it to the side before giving me a knowing look.

I huff at him “You planned this!” He smiled and pulled me “Such a glorious place. If we don’t enjoy it fully, wouldn’t that be a waste?”

I act mad and refuse to get in the water. He happily pulls me while tickling my feet still. I try to duck but finally give in to his playfulness and jump in the water. He pulled me towards the center of the spring when I suddenly make a halt gesture to him. He stopped and then craned his ears to listen,

It’s the sound of a flute, coming from far away. But the sound was growing louder so it meant the person playing the flute was coming towards the Yue Ya Spring. In moments Huo Qu Bing has also heard it. He said in frustration “There are clearly lunatics in Xi Yu. Instead of staying at home in the middle of the night, this crazy person is out roaming the desert playing the flute.”

I laugh “The people of the Han dynasty or the Xiong Nu who have committed an offense often run to Xi Yu to get away. It’s a place full of random people from all over, so clearly Xi Yu has its share of lunatics.” I swim towards the shore and Huo Qu Bing follows me while still grumbling.

The sound of the flute changed suddenly, from joy to sorrow. It was like a person who was remembering a joyful memory suddenly realizing it’s all gone, and the transition from joy to sorrow was instantaneous. I realize how talented the flute playing was and I’m touched by the sadness of the tune. I crane my neck towards the direction of the music.

A round bright moon was overhead and a snow white camel was running on the sand. Its footsteps don’t even kick up any dust and its endurance can rival any prized stallion. It appeared to be the famed Sky Mountain Snow Camel that is prized as much as the legendary Blood Sweat Horse.

A person wearing all white was riding on the camel and playing the flute. His dark hair was billowing in the wind and his wide robes were dancing with the movement of the camel. Such a bold stance instead looked very elegant on him. The moonlight enveloped him but couldn’t take away his loneliness and sorrow. His flute appeared to suck the entire vast expanse of the desert into his sadness.

Huo Qu Bing complimented him “Yu Er, he’s not even riding the camel properly, he’s letting it run at will. He resembles the famed scholar Lao Zhi riding his donkey and traveling wherever the donkey takes him. But Lao Zi stayed within the Han borders, but he’s so bold that he treats the desert like his backyard to roam as he wishes.”

As the figure gets closer and closer, my suspicions are confirmed and I quickly turn my head and try to climb out of the water. The camel stopped at the edge of the Yue Ya Spring and Jiu Ye held his flute and stared at the water and the mountains. His face showed his longing and his isolation. It seemed like him and his reflection are the only companions in this vast expanse.

He raised his head and looked towards the mountain, as if remembering something. He suddenly smiled, but it was immediately replaced with a look of loss. I hide in the shadows of the mountains and shrink into the water. In two short steps I would be onshore,

but my body cannot move. Huo Qu Bing silently stands beside me. In the silence I can hear a heart pounding, not sure if its him or me.

The camel snorted and kicked up the robe on the ground, then braying in our direction. Jiu Ye's hand immediately reached for his bow and arrow and he smiles in our direction "May I ask which lofty personage is over there?"

I'm still unable to face him, but Huo Qu Bing cannot endure any longer and he walks out with a smile "Brother Meng, its just us, a married couple who was seeking you. Who knew we would be fated to run into each other tonight." I can only quietly walk out beside Huo Qu Bing.

Jiu Ye saw Huo Qu Bing's naked torso and his face immediately turned ashen. He momentarily was so stunned he didn't move his bow and arrow directed towards us. His eyes glanced over me and quickly averted and pulled out a robe from his bag on the camel.

Huo Qu Bing was about to decline when he realized what it was for and he turned to look at me. My clothes were plastered on my body from the water. Huo Qu Bing reluctantly took the robe with a "thank you" and draped it over me. Jiu Ye lowered his bow and arrow and with a sad smile said "Last time, I also pointed that bow and arrow at you." Huo Qu Bing turned to look at me but I just lowered my head and didn't respond.

The three was us were so silent it was suffocating so I break the silence "Jiu Ye, we are here to see.....the baby." The baby is over a year old now and still we haven't named him. Jiu Ye smiled, this time with warmth, and replied "Without your permission, I've given him a nickname. The single character of "Yi" (means lightness). We all call him Yi Er."

Huo Qu Bing said "The character of "Yi", it can hide and evade, can also mean excellence. This name is very good. Let his real name be Yi as well. From now on, his name is Huo Yi."

It was impossible to thank Jiu Ye for what he did for us. Huo Qu Bing never said thank you to Jiu Ye, but by using the name Jiu Ye gave our son as his real name, it expressed his gratitude to Jiu Ye.

[A son's name is paramount and can only be given by a male elder of the family. For Huo Qu Bing to allow Jiu Ye to name his son is an unparallel acceptance of Jiu Ye's importance in the life of his son.]

Jiu Ye looked towards me, as if he didn't even hear what Qu Bing said, only waiting for what I wanted. I replied "I really like this name." He smiled and didn't mention the name anymore "I've asked for Yi Er to be brought from the Sky Mountains here. Do you want to see him?"

Huo Qu Bing and I exchanged a look and our hearts were thundering. Huo Qu Bing continued "The trip back and forth will take until the end of the day tomorrow. We'll be delayed for too long. Yu Er, can you endure it for a bit longer. Other things can be messed up, but with this matter I don't want to have a single thing go wrong."

So close and yet I can't see him yet. I force a smile and nod my head "I understand. One

year I've waited, a few more days I can endure.” Jiu Ye and Huo Qu Bing exchanged a look and Qu Bing said “Yu Er, I promise you, you will be reunited with Yi Er soon.”

Jiu Ye smiled wanly, but his loneliness in his eyes grew deeper. He glanced over and then turned the camel to leave. “Then I will wait for your message.” Huo Qu Bing hurriedly asked “How can I find you when I reach Ha Mi?”

The Sky Mountain Snow Camel moved like the wind, in seconds Jiu Ye was far away. His voice travels back “When you enter the city, Yu Er will be able to find me.”

Huo Qu Bing turned to look at me but didn’t press further. These two men, whenever they see each other, it was like two martial arts experts sparring. The pain they inflict is impossible to see and I can only carefully duck here and there. But I can’t help but be affected by their intense auras.

I actually have no clue why Jiu Ye said that I would be able to find him when I entered the city, so I can’t explain even if Huo Qu Bing asked me. I can only smile and think about it while trying to change the subject. Then I actually chanced upon a genuine question “How did you know Jiu Ye was currently in Ha Mi?” Huo Qu Bing startled and then looked elsewhere “The closest large city from here is Ha Mi, so I guessed he was there.”

“Isn’t Ge Er Mu also very large?”

“Yu Er, when you see Yi Er, what do you want to do the most?” Huo Qu Bing didn’t answer my question and instead asked me one. He used something I’ve been thinking about for such a long time to divert my attention. I had my suspicions, but I figure he had a reason for not telling me the truth. I don’t press any further and instead answer his question.

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 2 - Chapter 22

Chapter 38: Carefree

Huo Qu Bing was full speed ahead when it comes to war, but when it comes to seeing Yi Er, he's constantly worried. He's always fretting about something going wrong. Every time I ask, he goes through a list of possible dangers lurking. I see he's overly cautious and even unusually pessimistic, but seeing that he's just as eager for any information about our son, I control myself from pressuring him so that he can prepare everything.

As we wait and wait, what arrived first was Wei Kang getting into an incident.

According to the scouts, around the Ah Ke Sai area near Xu Fang there are random pockets of lingering Xiong Nu forces. Huo Qu Bing doesn't want to bother with them since these stragglers can't even be considered a Xiong Nu army. They are people who escaped from the battlefield or those who have broken army protocol, afraid to return to the Xiong Nu for fear of punishment. He considers them no more than thieves and outlaws, and capturing them is the job of the local law enforcement in the Xi Yu kingdoms. He also doesn't need or want to be dragged into capturing thieves and outlaws.

Wei Kang doesn't agree and argues with Huo Qu Bing about it. Everyone in the army feels torn, one is the son of the Great General Wei Qing and is close to the Crown Prince and is even Huo Qu Bing's cousin; the other is the Biao Qi General Huo Qu Bing who is currently prized by the Emperor. No one, not even Zhao Puo Nu, wants to get involved with this fight between two cousins who could easily make up tomorrow.

Huo Qu Bing endures until finally he loses patience and coldly says "I'm the commander so there is no place for you to second guess me. When you have the ability to lead your own army, then I will listen to your orders." Wei Kang can't say anything, he just gives Huo Qu Bing a hateful glare and mutters under his breath "The last name is not Wei, no wonder not aligned with us. My father raised a wolf in the midst."

Huo Qu Bing glared at Wei Kang and says nothing. I sigh, Wei Kang would already be dead if his last name wasn't Wei. Suddenly Wei Kang laughs and bows to Huo Qu Bing "General, please excuse me" and then he leaves. His last smile leaves me shaken, I have this really odd feeling.

I thought this matter was over when suddenly we find out Wei Kang disobeyed orders and attacked the Xiong Nu In Ah Ke Sai at night. When Huo Qu Bing finds out it's already the next day. He's furious "When Wei Kang returns, I will send his ass packing for Chang An immediately."

I share a sad smile with Zhao Puo Nu “Only if he comes back alive. The area around Ah Ke Sai is a rocky sharp cliff region created by thousands of years of wind blowing through the deserts. It’s a veritable maze, and at night the winds are like demons howling. The locals call it the Demon Region, and smart thieves try to lure their prey into that area so they are easy targets.”

Huo Qu Bing may be raging but he still have to go save Wei Kang. I want to go but he won’t let me “I’ve been in and out of army bases with tens of thousands of Xiong Nu, you can’t be worried that a few hundred thieves can harm me? I’ll go with Zhao Puo No, there is no one I trust more beside me from this army base. You stay here for me to guard the base.”

He’s firm and has a valid reason so I agree “No matter if you rescue him, you have to get out of there before sundown.” He smiled and nodded. As he got on his horse to leave, he suddenly stared at me and then leaped off the horse and kissed me on the forehead in front of all the soldiers “We’ll see Yi Er very soon.”

“What?” I forget my embarrassment and ask. His horse had already flown forward like the wind and all I see is the trail of dust kicked up by hundreds of soldiers following him.

From morning until noon, from afternoon under dusk, I start to get more and more worried. I pace in circles in the room, until finally I can’t take it anymore and rush out and jump on a horse. Before I set off, I hear horses coming towards the base.

I rush to meet them “Is Wei Kang fine?” Zhao Puo Nu’s face was all white, and behind him was Wei Kang and Ren An, both of whom looked somber and withdrawn. But with Ren An, I can see beneath his somber facade is the same look he had the day Li Gan was killed, Ren An looked secretly pleased.

I take two steps back “Where is Qu Bing?” Zhao Puo Nu lowered his head and soldiers carried a pallet over. Huo Qu Bing laid on the pallet, unconscious and his face completely white. My legs buckle and I almost collapse but Zhao Puo Nu supports me “The General is still alive.”

.....
I hold Zhao Puo Nu arms and take a deep breath. I force myself to stand “What happened? What danger is he in?”

Zhao Puo Nu gave me two arrows wrapped in cloth “To save Wei Kang, the General went into the Demon Region and we had a hard time finding the enemy because they knew the area so well. The area was narrow and rocky so we couldn’t form attack formations and had to split up. The General was hit by two arrows during the battle, none are in vital places. But.....the arrows are coated with poison.”

I’m so enraged and scared that the two arrows snap in my hands. I toss the ends arrow but save the tips in the cloth. I saw Wei Kang and Ren An flash expressions of joy quickly masked with disappointment. I tell Zhao Puo Nu “Tell everyone to disperse.” Wei Kang asked if I needed anything, and whether we should set off for Chang An to find better doctors. I glare at him and spit out “I just want you to immediately disappear from my sight. Otherwise I might just destroy you first.”

Wei Kang immediately got mad and rushed me, but Zhao Puo Nu pulled me aside while Ren An restrained Wei Kang and dragged him away. Zhao Puo Nu was normally very calm, but his eyes staring at them was also filled with rage.

“Did Ren An and Wei Kang drag out the battle with the outlaws?” Zhao Puo Nu lowered his head “The area was so dangerous and difficult to navigate, I couldn’t tell, so I dare not say anything.”

As the army doctor examined Qu Bing, I knelt down and held his hand, which was fisted tightly and cold. When I pry open his hand, I see written in his palm with blood is the character for “one” (pronounced Yi). It was blurry, like he used every ounce of his strength to write it. Because I was extra sensitive to the pronunciation of this word, I immediately started thinking elsewhere.

“Bring some water, the General has blood on his hand.” I wash away the bloody word and think. The army doctor sighs and kneels before me “Miss, you must return to Chang An! The two arrows are two different types of poison. I am useless and can do nothing. I can’t even differentiate the two poisons.”

I tearfully ask “Can you guarantee he’ll survive the few days trip to Chang An? That he won’t die of the poison before we arrive?” His lowered his head even more, and my emotions plummeted along with his head. I held on to an icy cold hand and it became my only source of strength to face this. I must be strong. “You can go now!”

I call out “General Zhao!” “I am here!” “Order the most trustworthy person to go to Chang An and find the best doctor and bring him here. Seal the entire city of Xu Fang, letting no one in or out. Do not let any news of this leak out. You do know what the undefeatable warrior god that is the Biao Qi General Huo Qu Bing is in the hearts and minds of the Xiong Nu and the various Xi Yu kingdoms, right?”

I take Qu Bing’s general’s seal and hand it to him “If anyone tries to enter or leave Xu Fang, execute the person!”

Zhao Puo Nu considered it and then kneeled to accept the general’s seal. He was worried and I tell him “If Wei Kang and Ren An want to cause problems, if you execute Ren An, then Wei Kang won’t try anything else. I won’t use this as an excuse to get rid of Wei Kang.” Zhao Puo Nu was relieved “I understand now.”

“Use the name of the Biao Qi General to ask around all the Xi Yu kingdoms for their best doctors. Just say.....say a woman following the General got food poisoning. But secretly leak news that this woman is the mother of Huo Tan.” “I will!”

“When the Xi Yu doctors arrive, only allow them to enter, do not allow any of them to leave. Split all the army doctors into two groups, always have one group waiting outside for immediate assistance. This is all I can think of for now.”

Zhao Puo Nu got up to leave when I got down on my knees. He was so startled he wanted to help me up, but when he touched my elbow he was shaking and red-faced. “General Zhao, twice you have helped me. This debt of gratitude Jin Yu will forever remember in my heart.”

He rushed outside and said “You needn’t be this way, I will do my best.”

With him gone, it was just Huo Qu Bing and me in the room. My surface courage shatters and I grab Qu Bing's hand and bite it, but I don't have the heart to bite down hard. "Qu Bing, if this is some scheme you cooked up with Jiu Ye, I will not speak to you for an entire year.....how can you scare me like this....." Before I finish talking my tears are falling "No, I just want you to be safe, I won't hold this against you.....I won't be mad, as long as you are safe....."

My tears fall on his palm and soon it forms a small puddle that reflects my own white face, which is filled with anguish and pain.

The current influence of the Han dynasty over the Xi Yu kingdoms is unprecedented. Ten years ago a Han merchant will get picked on when passing through Xi Yu. Even Han ambassadors have been detained before. But now, with one word from Huo Qu Bing, all the Xi Yu kingdoms urgently send their best palace physicians and find the best commoner doctors.

With Jiu Ye's influence in Xi Yu, news will surely reach him immediately. But the first to arrive isn't Jiu Ye, which confirms even more that the two of them have been plotting this. Because Jiu Ye knows the cover story about me being poisoned is fake, then he doesn't worry and therefore isn't in a rush to arrive. This makes their plot even more bulletproof.

At noon on the second day, a wrinkled and bearded old man who is hunched over arrives, using a crutch to help him move. Behind him are his two disciples carrying boxes. Everyone is wearing wide black robes, so it's impossible to tell their size. The servant bringing them in announce "This is the palace doctor sent from the Yi Nai Kingdom."

I meet the old man's eyes and quickly turn around. I tell the servant "Same rules, when the doctor is treating the patient no one is to enter the room." When the servant leaves, I check to make sure security is tight outside and we are alone before turning around and sitting down next to Qu Bing on the pallet.

Jiu Ye sighed softly and followed me without saying anything.

"What were you two planning? Was that group of outlaws your people in disguise?"

Jiu Ye felt Qu Bing's pulse and his face lost all color and he started to sweat. The longer he felt the pulse, his expression grew more and more alarmed, until in the end his hand was shaking "Yu Er, what happened? How did Huo Qu Bing have two different kinds of poison in his body."

When I saw him, I was starting to feel relieved, but now my heart plummets again. I've been so wracked with worry for a day and a night that right now I'm feeling dizzy "Didn't your people shoot him with the poison arrow? Didn't you two plan all this?"

Jiu Ye removed the bandage on Qu Bing's arm "The poison on the left arm is mine, but the one on the right is from someone else."

"I don't care who shot him with that other poison arrow, I beg you to please cure him." I take out the two arrow tips and show it to Jiu Ye, who puts it to his nose to sniff. He takes out instruments from his servant and tests the poison. After some time he's still investigating the poison, but as time passed I grew more and more afraid. I can't control myself and rudely ask "Aren't you exceptionally talented with medicine? You must be

able to cure this poison, right?”

His servant glared at me and indicated for me to be quiet. I realize what I’m doing and quickly say “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to.....”

Jiu Ye shook his head “Yu Er, you don’t need to say that. The poison on this arrow is called “Seven Day Suffering”, because it will take seven days to die once afflicted. The manner of death afterwards is like a person contracting an infectious disease. The poison is created by mixing seven different deadly herbs together. And the antidote requires the exact same seven deadly herbs. But when making it, the seven herbs are added in specific order, and the antidote must be cooked in reverse of that order with the same seven herbs.”

Jiu Ye’s voice was somber and my heart was chilled “Can you be sure of the order?”

Jiu Ye’s eyes were filled with sadness and regret “I can’t right now. Most poisons can be cured by finding out the ingredients. The cure for the “Seven Day Suffering” requires that and more, understanding the order it was made, making it very difficult to make an antidote. Because this poison is so vile and deadly, pretty much guaranteeing death, it is against moral law and the formula has been destroyed. I thought this poison had become extinct, who knew it would reappear.”

“What will happen if an antidote with the wrong order is consumed?” Jiu Ye was silent and then said “It will speed up the poison and lessen the days left.”

I put my face in my hands, fill of rage and bitterness. Why? Why did this happen?

‘What was the original plan?’ Jiu Ye was curing Huo Qu Bing of the poison Jiu Ye prepared and explained “Huo Qu Bing wanted me to help him leave the Palace. He thought long and hard and the only way out was to pretend he died to the entire world. Otherwise the Emperor will never release him. The Emperor values him so much he’s willing to flout Han law and taint his own legacy to let him get away with killing Li Gan. How could the Emperor agree to let him quit his post and leave? Plus those who oppose him in court also won’t let him off that easily. The ties between him and the Wei family will always remain. But the Wei family is now completely dead to him. He didn’t tell you in advance because he knew you would never allow him to take such a risk, even if he believed it was foul proof.”

Jiu Ye pointed to one of his servants “That is Teng Yin. He was a death row convict facing execution in the prison of the Yi Nai Kingdom. I paid his family a lot of money and he has agreed to let me do as I request of him.” Jiu Ye spoke to him and he took off his black robe “Yu Er, look at his body shape and size.”

“It’s quite similar to Qu Bing, and if he was wearing Qu Bing’s clothes and his face isn’t clear, it’s a good match.”

“My poison will cause a person’s skin to turn completely black after he dies and his facial features will rot. The “Seven Day Suffering” also has the same effect.”

“So you two planned this from the very beginning. From when Qu Bing asked to come to Xu Fang, he has been goading and baiting Wei Kang to use Wei Kang’s impetuous personality to push your scheme forward unwittingly. And he will become the best witness to Qu Bing’s “death”.”

I flash back to all the conflicts with Wei Kang recently and I realize what happened “You two were too smart for your own good. A rabbit pushed to the limit will try to leap on an eagle, much less an arrogant Wei Kang. He unconsciously piggybacked on your plan and created his own assassination attempt.”

I stand up and head out “I’ll get the antidote from Wei Kang.”

“Yu Er!” Jiu Ye stopped me “He will not give it to you. If he did, then he is admitting insubordination and it’s a capital offense. The Emperor is just looking for any opportunity to take out the Wei family and this would be perfect. It can also deepen the rift between Wei Qing and Huo Qu Bing. The Emperor would kill Wei Kang. Since Wei Kang is dead either way, he would rather die than admit the truth. Plus this is a Xi Yu secret poison, he probably doesn’t have any antidote.”

“I don’t believe I can’t torture him enough to get the information.”

“Yu Er, this is an army base, and Wei Kang is still the eldest son of Wei Qing. Half of the soldiers are on his side anyways. If you torture him without any concrete proof, you might cause an insurrection. At which point we don’t have any antidote and we’ll have lost time. We only have six days left as of now.”

My fear, anger, frustration, all boil together and I scream at him “I can’t do this, I can’t do that! So what am I supposed to do? What am I supposed to do?.....” My tears are falling and in his eyes I see his sadness for me “Huo Qu Bing, in your heart.....is he.....is he more important than anyone else. Even more important than your own life?”

I turn around to wipe my tears and don’t answer his question.

Jiu Ye says “Yu Er, don’t cry. I promise I’ll return Huo Qu Bing to you. Give me five days to mix the antidote. If after five days I can’t produce the antidote, then whatever you want to do, I will help you.” His voice was unusually calm, so calm it was like a death row inmate calmly walking to his own execution having accepted his fate.

I want to say something but no words come out. He lowered his head and walked outside on his crutch “Inform General Zhao Puo Nu to allow me to enter and exit the army base. Then find me a remote and quiet place where I can mix the antidote. I need absolute concentration to do it. You can’t come bother me. I will come to you when I have the results.”

He was disguised as an old man and was hunched over, but right now I felt like his hunched back was not faking it, but he was genuinely weighed down by what he needed to do.

My heart hurt and right when I’m about to call out “Jiu Ye”, behind me Huo Qu Bing weakly coughed. I quickly turn back around and see that Huo Qu Bing has his brows tightly furrowed as if he’s in great pain. I tenderly rub his forehead, and when I turn back, Jiu Ye has left already.

.....
In my life I have never experienced a more painful five days. Every day when the sun set, I felt like the most precious thing in my life was seeping away little by little. When the sun

sets on the seventh day, will my life descend into darkness just like the sun?

When I watch a new sun rise, I feel like there is still some hope. I repeat to myself that Qu Bing promised to protect me and the baby for his entire life. Jiu Ye promised me he will cure Qu Bing. Neither of them will not follow through with their promise.

Every time I walk to Jiu Ye's room, I don't dare enter. One time I heard a painful cry from inside the room and right when I'm about to rush in, Jiu Ye's servant Za Za Er stops me. He says nothing, only using silent and dark eyes to warn me to leave.

I cry out "Jiu Ye, what's wrong?" Some time later, a weary voice responds "I am using Teng Yin to test the poison and cannot be distracted. When I have news, I will call for you." I can only turn and leave.

On the night of the fifth night, Za Za Er moves Huo Qu Bing into Jiu Ye's residence but doesn't allow me to enter. I call out from outside "Jiu Ye, Jiu Ye, why don't you let me in? Is the antidote process very painful? No matter what, I want to stay by Qu Bing's side."

After some time, I heard from inside Jiu Ye's voice "Come in!"

Za Za Er moved out of the way and I rushed inside. The moment I walk in I realize the room is pitch black. As I was wondering, suddenly I smell a faint fragrance on my nose. My body collapses on the floor. I never would have expected Jiu Ye to trick me, and when I'm passing out I feel a pair of hands holding me "Jiu Ye, why....."

I don't know how long I've been unconscious, the moment I wake up I keep thinking "why" and I don't even know why I'm asking that question. When I suddenly realize the reason, I sit straight up and shout "why", and I shock Za Za Er with my yelp. He gives me a hate filled baleful glare. I look around and see only a stranger laying next to me. We're laying side-by-side on the pallet, and our hands are placed on top of each other.

I startle and recognize that it's Qu Bing! I lightly hold his hand and I can feel the dark energy has left him. His breathing is calm, indicating the poison has been cured. I'm so happy that I don't even know what to do, I can only stare at Qu Bing.

"Yu Er?" Qu Bing slowly opened his eyes. He looked confused for a moment before reacting "Meng Jiu saved me?" I rush into his arms and my tears start falling. He wipes my tears "The plan got waylaid, I'm sorry." I continue to cry, unable to say anything.

Za Za Er kept coughing and we're reminded that someone else is in the room. I get up "Where is Jiu Ye?"

Za Za Er didn't understand me but got my gist. He had a poker face as he handed Qu Bing a handkerchief. He pointed to Teng Yin laying in the corner. Teng Yin was dressed in the same clothes Qu Bing wore that day, and his face had already turned black and he was giving off the smell of bodily decay.

Qu Bing opened the letter:

Huo Qu Bing

The fate is done, your wish is complete.

The moving clouds are no more than people aging

The yellow sandy desert, each seeking our own carefree

This parting today, no meeting again in sight

After Qu Bing read it, he silently handed it to me. The last words on the handkerchief indicate the brush was pressed down heavily and the ink soaked through. Jiu Ye left without saying goodbye? No meeting again in sight?

He placed Qu Bing and I side-by-side on the pallet, putting our hands together. Was that his final wish for us?

In my daze, I feel like I can still smell him, but I know that is just my sadness conjuring up these sensations. This time, he really has left, he really has completely given up and left! He will never again appear in my life!

Jin Yu, you should be happy. Only by letting go today can he reach out and capture tomorrow's happiness. Perhaps tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow, or the day after the day after tomorrow....he will find happiness. Without giving up today, how can one get to tomorrow? Jin Yu, you should be happy.....

.....

The doctors from Chang An can do nothing. Initially they don't believe it's poison, calling it an infectious disease. I angrily kick out all the doctors from the various Xi Yu kingdoms, and Za Za Er and the shrouded Teng Yin leave along with them.

I just stay in a daze beside Huo Qu Bing, whose body is starting to rot. In the army base, the mood is sorrowful and anxious. With the doctors leaving, news will soon travel through Xi Yu, and then onto Xiong Nu, that Biao Qi General Huo Qu Bing is dying. When the news reaches Chang An, how will it affect the world?

"General Zhao, let's return to Chang An! Qu Bing would want to see Chang An, that was where he grew up." No one objected and even Wei Kang was accommodating, everyone rushing back towards Chang An.

At the edge of the world, a red round sun is slowly setting in the West. Before the sun set completely, Huo Qu Bing went to sleep forever, never to awaken. A legendary undefeatable warrior god, he chased the Xiong Nu out of the Desert South region. But right at the peak of his youth, he died at the age of twenty-four, though his name and legend will live on. People will write about his military exploits, and thousands of years later, vestiges of him will still percolate in the He Xi region.

The raging waters from the melted Snow Mountain was rushing through the river like the Milky Way has fallen from the sky and is blanketing the earth. The sound was like millions of horse galloping.

Over a thousand soldiers are kneeled on the ground. Even Ren An and Wei Kang looked genuinely sad. Ren An looked torn and he sighed "The son of the Heavens, a rare talent of an entire generation. A loss for our nation!" He got off his horse and bowed his head on the ground heavily three times, leaving his forehead all bloody.

Zhao Puo Nu saw me holding Huo Qu Bing as if I was a statue. I sat there the entire night and he made sure no one bothered me and he stayed beside me. A sliver of white was

creeping up over the East when he finally decided “Ms. Jin, the General is gone. The weather is hot now and we need to hurry back to Chang An. You....you please.....”

I raise my head and my eyes are swimming with tears. One by one it falls, faster and faster. He’s gone. Yes, he’s gone! No meeting again in sight!

I put down Huo Qu Bing and rush to the river. No one has reacted since they are all kneeled on the ground. When Zhao Puo Nu realizes and reaches for me, I take out a dagger and point it at my chest. I back up while shaking my head, indicating for him not to get close.

Zhao Puo Nu was sobbing and crying “Ms, Jin, please don’t do anything foolish.”

“When you get back to Chang An, bow three times to the Emperor for me and say “Since the child has the Emperor to raise him, then Jin Yu doesn’t need to suffer alone on this earth for ten more years.”

As I finished, I stab the dagger in my chest, and with the blood spurting out, my body falls into the rushing river and in moments I’m gone in the currents. I hear from the shore loud screams “Jin.....Yu.....” reverberating in the sky.

.....

Huo Qu Bing carried a completely soaked me and climbed in the carriage. He took a cloth to dry my hair “Your eyes are red and swollen, clearly you cried your guts out. Thank heavens for the heavy currents, things could not have gone more perfectly. Wei Kang and them will not suspect at all. You needed to cry a bit was enough, what’s with the dramatic acting?”

I lightly touch the intricate dagger, a gift from Yu Dan all those years ago. By chance it returned to me, almost as if it was meant to help me find my happiness. Yu Dan, I thank you!

“Qu Bing, where are we going?”

“First to Ha Mi to pick up our son, and then we’ll fly as free as the birds. We’ll live as we want. But before that, we need to go find Brother Wolf. He’s getting older, and in a few years some wolves will challenge him. Rather than wait for then, have him resign his position and we can go to Bang Lian Mountains together. The only promise I made in my life was made there. At the Bang Lian Mountains, in front of your Papa’s grave, with Brother Wolf as our witness, I want to marry you and fulfill the promise I made many years ago. Despite being late, but.....”

I laugh and push his hands away “Did you even ask me if I’m willing? Since proposing is a big deal, you’re not even being serious.”

He quickly bowed and asked solemnly “Yu Er, will you marry me?”

I turn my head and smile, refusing to answer him. “Only wishing for one person’s heart, never being apart until our hair is white.” Because of this person beside me, I know I am blessed.

He waited for some time and then asked urgently again. I lightly nod my head and he grabs my hand, his face lighting up into a brilliant smile like the sun.

Outside of the carriage, the land is vast and the sky is unlimited. A red sun is beginning to rise once again.

Ballad of the Desert - Volume 2 - Chapter

Epilogue

Epilogue: Shadow of Sorrow

The different orders of mixing the ingredients for the “Seven Day Suffering” is all very hard to differentiate since the results are so similar. Despite it being hard, if there was enough time and he could study Huo Qu Bing’s poison strain and use someone to test the antidote, then he would definitely find the cure,

With seven ingredients, the number of order combinations make five thousand forty different concoctions. Plus if the amounts are varied, then it shoots up to over ten thousand different mixtures. Even if enough test subjects are found to test the poison, but everyone’s body is different and the reaction is different.

With five days, is impossible to find an antidote. Meng Jie bitterly laughed. If it was possible, the “Seven Day Suffering” wouldn’t be deemed a truly hellish poison that was banned in all the Xi Yu kingdoms. His mind flashed the visage of Yu Er crying. He smiled and decided. This will do, this is the only way.

He used his own body to test the poison. Only by feeling it himself could he sense the minute differences and find the antidote. Even if he had to rely on luck as well, it was his only way. Za Za Er and Teng Yin kneeled before him bowing non stop “Shi Nan Tian, if you need to test the poison, please use us instead. Please you cannot test the “Seven Day Suffering” on yourself.”

Meng Jiu calmly said “I have decided. Teng Yin, please prepare and Za Za Er please guard the outside. Don’t let anyone in, especially that girl you saw today.”

Within five days, he tested countless antidotes, so many Teng Yin had lost count. Perhaps Huo Qu Bing’s life wasn’t meant to end now, or perhaps Jiu Ye’s heartfelt wish touched the Heavens, so Meng Jiu hit upon the right antidote. When it happened, he smiled, and Teng Yin felt tears come to his eyes.

All medicine has some poisonous properties, much less poison. The poison plus the antidote, how many did Shi Nan Tian take during the five days? Teng Yin only took a few dozen and still he was in excruciating pain and felt like his insides were being ripped apart. It was worse than the torture he endured in the death row prison. But Shi Nan Tian, this crippled seemingly weak young man, how did he endure it? What kind of soul was hidden in his body?

After taking the antidote, Meng Jiu stood up and took his crutch. He was about to order Za Za Er to get Jin Yu, but then he collapsed on the ground. Teng Yin rushed to help him but

Jiu Ye said "I'll do it."

Teng Yin was worried but Za Za Er knew Meng Jiu's personality so pulled Teng Yin aside. Meng Jiu tried many times but he couldn't stand up. His two legs wouldn't listen to him. He lifted his robe and looked at his legs. His one healthy leg was completely black from the knee on down. The other shriveled leg, because the blood circulation was bad, was less black. Meng Jiu lightly pressed on his nerves and investigated. All the color in his face disappeared.

Za Za Er has followed by Meng Jiu's side since he was young, learning medicine from him. He looked at Meng Jiu's leg, and realized what had happened. Shi Nan Tian's nerves in his legs have been completely destroyed by him testing the antidote. The healthy leg was now starting to die and shrivel. Despite Shi Nan Tian being able to control the amount tested perfectly, but in the past five days he simply tested too many poison and antidotes.

The residual poison in his body was pushed into his lower body by the new poison being injected. Now there is likely nothing that can be done to save his legs. He wanted to say something to comfort Shi Nan Tian, but when he opened his mouth, he could only cry.

Meng Jiu was originally crestfallen, but when he heard Za Za Er crying, he gave a small smile. He pointed to a chair, indicating for it to be brought over "In five days, the Heavens let me find the antidote. This is probably the price the Heavens wants in exchange. Have Yu Er bring General Huo here! But keep her outside, don't let her in."

Za Za Er was enraged. Who was that woman? How much did Shi Nan Tian do for her? How much did he sacrifice for her? Even now, he doesn't want her to know. But he dare not oppose Jiu Ye's orders so he suppressed his rage and sadness and went to get that woman.

Meng Jiu heard Yu Er calling from outside asking to be let in. He knew that he couldn't prevent her much longer. He decided to let her in. But when he's treating Huo Qu Bing, she'll see his sad state and ask what happened to his legs.

He ordered Teng Yin to extinguish the lamps, and when Yu Er walked in, he released a fainting smoke bomb.

It was the dead of night by the time all the poison was cleared from Huo Qu Bing's body. An exhausted Meng Jiu silently stared at Yu Er and Huo Qu Bing sleeping side-by-side on the pallet.

A wind drifted in the window and extinguished the lamp. But it wasn't dark out, the moonlight shone in through the window and happened to land on Yu Er's face, turning her skin as translucent as jade.

So close, so close that he can reach out and touch her.

But so far. So far that she will never know how close they once were, and how far they will be for the rest of this lifetime.

Their first meeting, the girl in the raggedy clothing, the girl who laughed out loud.

Their reunion in Chang An, the thoughtful and cheerful girl who always tried to take care of him.

She admired the moon on the roof, he played the flute in the courtyard.

She visited in the night, but stood outside his window and didn't dare come in.

She learned the flute for him, she placed her entire heart in "The Song of the Yue Person".

From Fall until Spring, from Spring until Winter, she planted the Lover's Vines. She planted her heart, she planted her love for him.

That day, the drops of blood on the flute, her heartbreak, he thought it would be one moment of pain in his life. Who knew it would become a lifetime's pain for him.....

Everything seems like it was just yesterday. When she broke the flute and turned and walked out of his life, it was still stepping on the pain in his heart.....

In front of the Lover's Vine, he cruelly pulled his sleeve out of her hands little by little. Meng Xi Mo, how could you have been so cruel to her back then? How could you have been so cruel to yourself? Why couldn't you let yourself live freely for once?

.....

.....

If the first time he heard her play a song for him, he said "It was lovely."

If he didn't avert his eyes every time she looked at him.

If he didn't pull his sleeve out of her hands.

If he opened his mouth to explain the moment she leaped on the roof.

If every word she said when he was sick and she was holding him was true.....

If.....if.....sadly life has no ifs.

He didn't know how long he stared at her, and only when the room got darker did he snap out of it.

The moon was falling and it was the final bit of darkness before dawn.

A new day is starting, but he will be leaving her life forever.

Huo Qu Bing and she are suited for each other. He can accompany her as she travels the world, ride over thousands of miles, climb the highest mountain, swim the fastest rivers.....

And himself.....

Meng Jiu looked down at his own legs. From now on, he will have to rely on a wheelchair forever.

One handkerchief contains all his longing. He raised the pen and put it down repeatedly. In the end he could not write the characters "Yu Er."

He could not say goodbye to her forever. He can only use "Huo Qu Bing" to start the letter.

The moment Yu Er enters the city of Ha Mi, she will see a doctor's clinic sign with the

gold sandy desert as the backdrop and the blue verdant shape of the Yue Ya Spring. She will know immediately where to go to pick up Yi Er.

That day when he chanced to encounter then at the Yue Ya Spring, he was peeved that Huo Qu Bing chose to refer to them as “a married couple”, so he wanted to see Huo Qu Bing’s expression when Yu Er saw the sign. But now he regretted it. Now he would rather Yu Er never once think about him.

When he wrote “No meeting again in sight”, he had a strange smile on his face. But underneath the smile was a heart that shattererd.

Yu Er, this is the last thing I can do for you. With your personality, if you knew my legs were destroyed forever trying to save Huo Qu Bing, you would never be at ease going with Huo Qu Bing to live your carefree existence. I want to see the you who is flying, and not the you who is tied to me because of guilt.

The first rays of the morning light hit the room and shine its golden light on the two people laying on the pallet. Meng Jue smiled, their world belongs in the sunlight.

Meng Jiu picked up Yu Er’s hand, and after hesitating for a moment, he bent down and kissed her firmly on the lips.

Yu Er, forgive me, forgive my overstepping my bounds this once.....

Her lips was just like he imagined, sweet, warm, fragrant. But he couldn’t have imagined the degree of pain he was feeling, it was pain that seeped into his bones. The tenderness between their lips, the touch of their lips, it was branded on him based on hopelessness.....

After some time, he raised his head. He put her hand on Huo Qu Bing’s hand and turned to leave. He wheeled himself out.

No meeting again in sight!

.....and then Jiu Ye began to hum the love song of the plains telling of the love story between Ba Ya Er and Yi Zhu.

The person on the pallet is not yet awake. This time she did not see his figure leaving, and he also did not look back.

He slowly rode alone on his Snow Mountain Camel. Such a camel can fly like the wind, but because of his legs, the camel would have to endure the slow pace from now on.

But right now, he wanted the camel to go slower, even slower, as slow as possible, but the camel still took him further and further away from her.

The blue sky went on for miles, the green grass appeared to connect to the sky, the bright sun was shining down. The white sheep herd, the black horse pack, it was like fallen pearls littering the grassing plains.

A healthy herder was tending to his flock, a beautiful girl was singing a herding song. Her voice rang out in joy, the song of Ba Ya Er and Yi Zhu.

Jiu Ye couldn’t help but stop his camel and listen. In this lifetime, happiness was once so

close to him, but he missed it.

His heart was like knives cutting it, the pain caused him to start coughing violently. It was some time before he could straighten himself. He tasted an acrid sweetness in his mouth, and when he looked down he saw the snow white camel had a few drops of dark blood on it. It normally should be red blood, but it was tinged with blackness. He glanced at it and then reached out his hand to wipe it off the camel.

The wind of the plains breezed past him, carrying fallen petals in its midst. After it passed, there was only a lonely shadow on the ground that kept him company.

The stunning red beauty of the sunrise had passed and now the sky was blue tinged with white clouds. His heart came to a realization, and he patted the camel for it to move faster. He took out his flute and played the tune to accompany the herding girl's song.

The rainbow after the rain, the sunrise on the edge of the ocean, the first Spring flowers, most of the beauty in this world can never be owned. It is enough to have experienced beauty.

The clear tune of the flute mixed with the herding girl's song and the sound drifted to the sky. The pain in Meng Jiu's eyes remained, but he had a slight smile.

The emotion was deep, but their fate was shallow. But.....no regrets.....only longing.

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